

THE PLUCKING SERIES



Violet

WHAT THE

Pluck

FRANCESCA PENN

WHAT THE PLUCK?

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OceanofPDF.com

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PROLOGUE

VIOLET

“GIRL, JUST FLY OUT AND GO HOME! WALK AWAY AND DON’T come back!” I yell at the television.

Some of these damn made-for-television movies get on my nerves. One of the main characters is always getting mad for a stupid miscommunication, then going off on the other. I wish I would get accused of being the worst, then run after the dude. Fuck you very much, sir. He would not be stressing me out on my vacation.

“Tuh,” I grumble as I shake my head.

I don’t understand all the unnecessary theatrics. Y’all either like each other or you don’t. Then again, there aren’t any guys in my life right now. It’s one of the downsides of being a corporate lawyer, I guess. My life isn’t one of those sexy lawyer shows with ‘at work lover’ options. I have yet to see anyone professionally that I’d want personally.

Blowing out a bored sigh, I put down my bowl of popcorn and stretch out on the couch. The slow night makes me realize that I should put some effort into making some friends. It gets lonely sometimes, but I don’t want to settle just for the sake of having a companion. No, I have much higher expectations for my future guy; he’d have to stimulate me on all levels. I have yet to find him. Accepting my new position and moving to Santa Barbara was the most impulsive thing I’ve ever done. It wasn’t exactly spontaneous; I had to interview and house hunt prior to moving.

My decisions have me feeling left out of my old life since my best friend is a time zone away. Lavy, my plant, is my only company.

Fuck—I mean, shucks. I’m really trying my best not to cuss anymore—I forgot to check on it this week. I know it’s supposed to be a low-maintenance plant, but it needs *some* attention. Quick feet carry me to my balcony to check on it. I drop my head. Just as I feared, my baby looks sick. Once I give it a thorough drink, I find my mind wandering again. I just don’t know what to do with free time. I’ve been on the move since law school, but the partners sent me on a forced vacation to avoid burnout.

Get to know the city, they said. Build ties to the community, they suggested. My ties were in solving corporate incidents and disputes; obviously, that’s not good enough. It’s time to mingle and make new friends. But how? My phone lights up with an alert as if it’s trying to give me a divine message.

The Hooked app. I downloaded it but have never used it. Logging in, I start setting up my profile. The pool might be smaller in Santa Barbara, but it’s worth a try. I’ve tried another dating app, and this one is supposed to be different. I’m settled, bored, and out of reasons to put dating off any longer.

I’m not sinking all my hopes into this app. Luckily, they have other services like parties, speed dating, dating coaching, and different types of singles events. The ability to change my package is the main reason I decided to give them a try.

It doesn’t take me long to answer the questions. It’s the profile picture that stops me. I haven’t taken any in the year and a half I moved. Leilani, my best friend, told me I was a workaholic, but I’m surprised at how bad it has become. The partners were right.

I still hate the idea of dating. Leilani is lucky. Her marriage to Ambrose Heywood ensures she’s done with this part of her life. It must be nice. Looks like I have two goals, finish my dating profile, and find a way to make local friends. My mind

goes back to Lavy... maybe I should learn more about plants...

Sighing, I give in and call Lei, since she knows way more about plants than I do.

“Hello,” she answers distractedly.

“So, I almost killed my plant.”

Her laughter causes major eye rolling on my end. Love her, but she gets on my nerves sometimes.

“Girl! I picked a French Lavender plant because it’s fairly easy to care for.”

I start a video call so I can roll my eyes at her properly. “Well, Lavy doesn’t like my ass right now.”

“I know, I should have insisted that you’d get a snake plant. Virtually no maintenance.”

With a huff, I sink back into my spot on the sofa. “Nah, I’m going to learn, dammit.”

“As you should, you do have a plant name and all.”

“So do you,” I point out, despite knowing that she has a much better handle on all of this than I do.

“True, but I’m not slowly killing plants. Think of it as one of your goals. Organize something.”

My mind starts working. *Organize something.* That’s something I can do. I look over at Lavy and back at the phone. Excitement flits through my body as an idea forms.

“A gardening club!”

Lei looks at me like I’ve lost my mind but doesn’t drop her eyes from the screen. “What?”

I bounce back up to a sitting position and tuck my feet under my butt. Ideas and a sense of purpose hitting me and igniting an excitement I haven’t felt in a long time.

“A gardening club! I’ll start a club for women with plant names. We can commiserate about bad jokes made about our names, have wine mixers, and...”

“Learn about plants?”

I wave my hand impatiently. “Of course, that’s the main goal. I’m planning the other stuff. I don’t want us to have the usual club where people think we’re some old ladies pruning together. No, people will want to join my club! Oh, we’ll have membership pins!”

“Just remember, you can’t organize *fun*, Vi.”

I frown at her, although I know that I’ve been known to get too far inside my head. I refuse to overthink this.

“And that’s why you’re going to help.”

“I’m sorry, you’re breaking up. Damn, the connection is bad...”

Lei’s avoidance pulls a giggle out of me. “Yeah, yeah. I’ll call you after I map out a plan, set up bylaws, research existing clubs, and-”

“Yeah, yeah. You’re going into Vi mode. Got it.”

“I just need a name.”

“Violet’s Garden Club?” Lei suggests, her tone tipping up at the end to signal a question.

“Nah, too basic. We can do better than that. It has to speak to women 25 and up.”

I look at my phone just to see Lei’s ceiling.

“What are you doing, Lei?”

“Plucking my eyebrows.”

I shake my head and laugh. She makes fun of my uptightness, but let just one of her hairs be out of place...

“Well, *pluck* your ass back on this call. You’re supposed to be helping.”

“One, I never said I was helping. Two, I do what the *pluck* I want, lady.”

My neck rolls, though she can’t see it. “Girl, if you don’t-” I stop talking when inspiration hits. “That’s it!”

Lei picks up the phone to give me a confused look.
“What’s it?”

“I’ll use variations of pluck to replace fuck.”

“Will that help with your goal to stop cursing?”

“Abso-*plucking*-lutely!”

Leilani laughs but she’s getting in the spirit. “So what are you *plucking* naming it?”

“I want a play on words that can be posh yet edgy. I don’t want my members to be too embarrassed to say it.”

“So, ladylike?”

“We should be ladies, since we may want to have a tea party or something.”

“Okay, fancy lady. What say you? What’s the *plucking* name?”

After a few seconds of staring into space, I snap my fingers.

“We’ll be The Plucking Ladies Garden Club!”

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CHAPTER 1

VIOLET

2 years later

I COULDN'T BE PROUDER. MY GROUP IS ABOUT TEN WOMEN strong, and like me, a lot are transplants trying to figure out the Santa Barbara life. We had one of our Saturday hang outs which are separate from the weekly Wednesday night meeting.

I'm starting to love it here, though I still don't know everything. Leilani co-chairing the group with me, albeit virtually, gives us another thing to bond over. It makes me miss her a little less since we're in contact often for club matters.

She had popped in a few times to visit the ladies, but it's not the same. Luckily, I have more friends to keep me occupied. It makes it easier to ignore my lack of dating. As if taunting me, an email comes in from Hooked reminding me that I never finished my profile.

Hooked compatibility checker is now live. Get matched with someone on your level!

Interesting, I like when things are a little more exact. Pausing yet another movie, I start the questionnaire, marveling over how many things have changed over the past two years, but this one thing has stayed the same. No man! I don't need one to define me, but I like to cuddle, dammit.

My doorbell, a sound I hardly hear, startles me, causing my phone to slip out of my fingers. My silliness pulls a chuckle out of me as I retrieve my phone. I'm tripping. While

I'm not used to hearing my doorbell, it should not scare me even if it's almost midnight.

Mama always told me to be cautious, especially since I live alone, so I pull up my doorbell camera instead of walking to the door. Leilani appears to be on my porch, looking around. Her curls are pulled back into a bun, and she's chewing on her lip. My happiness to know she's here doesn't stop the concern from forming.

Rushing to the door, I swing it open.

"Heeeey, girl!" I greet her before we hug.

"Hey." Her voice is soft and missing some of her usual cheer.

Leilani steps around me while avoiding my gaze. She knows that I know something is wrong. It's been a while since I've seen her dressed so simply in jeans and a graphic tee.

"What's going on, Lei?" I probe. She isn't surprised that I got straight to the point.

I'm not allergic to pleasantries, but my need to know the bottom line almost always derails my manners.

"I left him," she says with a slight shrug. Lei drops her bags and plops down on my couch with a long sigh.

"Who? The driver?"

Lei looks up at me, her eyes full of amusement and sadness. "Ambrose...Brody. I couldn't take it anymore."

My face falls because I've seen how much they loved each other. I've been incredibly distracted between the club and working towards becoming a partner, so I didn't notice any relationship woes. I have no bearing on their relationship, yet guilt is my primary feeling. Shaking my head, I refocus; it's not about me right now.

"Oh, honey, I'm sorry," I whine as I pull her into a hug. "What happened?"

Lei shakes her head, exhaustion covering her entire body. "I don't want to talk about it right now, Vi." She pulls back

and looks me in the eyes, with a pleading stare. “Please do me a favor. If he calls, buy me some time, and tell him I’m not here.”

It hurts my feelings that my favorite couple is at odds, but Lei was my friend first. In fact, I wouldn’t even know Ambrose if it wasn’t for her. My head is bobbing in an empathic nod as I agree.

“Of course, I bought another unit in this condominium to list on a homeshare site. You can stay there as long as you need. I won’t say a word.”

Lei nods although I know she’s only half listening. “Thanks, Vi. I’ll pay you the rental rate.” She spears me with a look when I begin to protest. “It’s non-negotiable. If the Heywoods have nothing else, they have money.”

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CHAPTER 2

TIMOTHY

Six Months later

BEING A HEYWOOD IS A LIFE FILLED WITH OBLIGATIONS, whether we decide to participate in the family business or not. I was one of the rebellious members who wanted nothing to do with agriculture. However, I ended up being my own joke. It's in my blood. I've spent my life learning different ways to make plants beneficial to human life; if I would have focused enough, I could have been a botanist. I'm not a botanist, but I still love the agriculture business, despite myself. After college, I'd dropped my MBA on my mom's display shelf and went out into the world pretending that I wasn't a Heywood.

One of the perks of being rich the way we are is that most people don't know who the fuck we are at first glance. I spent plenty of time getting to know people across the globe without realizing that I was building a new avenue of Heywood money. My family's main source of business is mass producing feed for farm and domestic animals, agricultural real estate, and all things apples.

My great-grandfather's business, which started on a small patch of farmland, spiraled into a multi-million-dollar business by the time I was born. My dad took over as CEO when I was three and remained until Ambrose was ready to take over. I'm not complaining, I always thought if anyone would take over, it'd be Ambrose. It doesn't matter that I'm the oldest, I never saw it as my "birthright." My other projects have kept me busy for the last four years, and that's where my focus lies.

Ambrose and I are still working towards the same goal, the Heywood legacy.

The town car slows down, then stops in front of the closed restaurant. When we want to see each other, whether we discuss business or not, we prefer to be alone. I haven't seen him in person for almost a year. It's not usual for us, so I'm even more excited for our meal. I've dialed back my time with Ambrose since he's been married. I want him to enjoy his wife without worrying about leaving me out. I have other family and friends to see, but he wouldn't see it that way. Luckily, I've been out of the country most of the year, finalizing some of my deals.

The fall gives enough chill for me to pull on my peacoat when I get out. It's not too cutting, but I spent quite a bit of time in warmer climates. The city lights shine through the floor-to ceiling windows, playing off the classic white tabletops. Ambrose sits at our table but hasn't seen me yet. I see him kill his whiskey neat, then refill his glass. We both love fine liquor, but he's drinking like he has problems.

Concern quickens my steps as my big brother mode activates. Ambrose rises and pulls me into a hug while he sports a smile that doesn't quite reach his hazel eyes. I really hope he doesn't think he's hiding what's wrong with him.

Shrugging off my jacket, I lower myself into the seat across from him. The decanter of whiskey is already on the table. The server wastes no time pouring some for me. Ambrose chews on his slice of bread like it's someone he wants to fight. Upon a better look, I'd describe his mood as hurt and angry.

What the fuck happened?

"You can stop studying me," he mumbles after a sip.

"Sure, once you tell me the problem."

Ambrose's chuckle is genuine even though it isn't light-hearted. "You can't fix this issue, Tim."

I lean on the table and level him with a serious stare. "Try me."

Ambrose runs his hand over his brown beard. “Leilani left me.”

I can feel my eyebrows dropping from my confused frown. “What the fuck? When?”

His sigh is long, tensing my shoulders with each second. “About six months.”

“Six months!”

Ambrose looks around the empty restaurant, then back at me like I’ve lost my damn mind. “She left while I was on a business trip. No note. Nothing.”

I know how much he loves her, so his hurt is mine, but my anger is my own. I couldn’t imagine the woman I love just up and leaving me like that. My blood boils like it happened to me and Ambrose’s expression isn’t helping.

“Drag her ass back here and make her face you.”

“I’d have to locate her first.”

The server comes over, dropping off our plates since Ambrose ordered for us. My medium rare steak stares at me, but my hunger has somewhat dissipated.

“Locate her?”

“Yeah, she flew to Vegas, but I can’t find any other information.”

“Didn’t her friend, Lilac, move west?”

“Violet, and San Diego. I called her. She said she hasn’t seen her.”

I pick up my steak knife and lean in to keep my voice low. “And you believed her?”

“Honestly, I don’t know what to believe,” Ambrose admits. “I’m just trying to wrap my mind around the entire thing.”

The fight is not there, the Ambrose I know would have torn apart the world by now.

“Here’s what I know. If Leilani truly disappeared, her friend would have had a search party by now. I can guarantee she knows where she’s at. She’s just not telling you.”

Ambrose chews his steak angrily, some of his usual fire burning in his eyes. “You’re right.” Dropping his fork, he picks up his phone and dials on speaker. “Hey, Vi,” he says when she answers. “I’m still looking for Leilani. Have you heard from her?”

An unnecessary pause makes me even more suspicious. My eyes narrow at the phone, although I know she can’t see me.

“No, I thought she was with you.”

I’ve only met her once at the wedding, but she’s slowly climbing up my shit list. I can tell she’s lying from here.

“Stop fucking playing and put Leilani on the phone.” My growl is loud enough for her to hear me.

“She’s not here,” she fights back, digging into her lie.

“You’re full of shit and it’s not acceptable. Tell Leilani to be an adult and face her husband.”

Ambrose glares at me because he hates when I speak for him, but I need results. I hate to see him or anyone I care about hurting over bullshit.

“Watch how you speak to me and who the pluck is this anyway?”

Pluck?

“Stop bullshitting and I wouldn’t have to speak to you at all.”

“Let me help you with that.”

The line disconnects and the chuckle that escapes me holds no mirth. I take my frustration out on the steak, slicing it like I plan to do Violet’s lies.

“Looks like I need to take another flight in the morning.”

Ambrose gives me a weary look. “Is that so?”

A smirk crosses my face as I chew. “Worry about running your part of the business, baby brother. You’ll have answers soon.”

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CHAPTER 3

VIOLET

WORK WAS THE CRAZIEST IT HAS BEEN IN A LONG TIME. A NEW client has a clusterpluck of contractual issues and we had to put out a lot of fires just to stay out of court. While there is still a lot of work to do, we got the load to a manageable amount. I'm just happy the meeting is tonight. The theme for this meeting is Wine Wednesday and I have bottles.

It's unlike me, but I didn't check to see if anyone new registered. I'm almost done setting up the wine table before the meeting, then I should have five minutes before the ladies arrive to look over the list.

After my weird phone call from Ambrose, Leilani opted to sit this meeting out, so I'm flying solo. I still don't fully know why she's avoiding Ambrose, but I don't want to push. I did tell her that she should talk to him soon. The weariness I hear in his voice every time he calls me makes me feel for him.

"Hey, girl. Sorry I'm early. I know you like to have things perfect."

I throw a smile over my shoulder at Ivy. Her signature afro is like her puffy halo and an unofficial extra member of the club. Ivy is one of the experts I had to have in my club. She's one of the ladies who has given me valuable information to keep my plants alive and gave me the courage to start a garden. She's sweet as pie but has been a little distracted lately. It may be because of her fine ass friend, Kale, but that's none of my business.

“It’s okay, Ivy. Work was a madhouse, so I’m a little behind.”

She puts down her purse with a laugh. “Only you would call this being behind.”

I laugh and shake my head. I see a lot of things wrong with my setup. “I don’t think everything is aligned. I haven’t had time to check the guest list to see if I have enough glasses out, and I wanted to put the chairs in a circle.”

“All minor things that I can help you with since I’m here.”

I give her a huge smile as I nod to accept her help. “You’re a lifesaver.”

The ladies start to filter in after I finish making the table perfect. Ivy has the chairs in the circle I want and now I just need to check the list, lest someone new shows up. A few low lady whistles and heavy footsteps pull me out of work mode. My club is all female, so a man’s footfalls make my ears perk up immediately. A tall, muscular yet lean body stalks my way in navy chinos and a crisp light blue linen shirt that looks like it was made to worship his chest. Our eyes meet and an electric feeling hits me for more than one reason.

One, there is nothing good about Timothy Heywood showing up. Two, I hate to admit he looks damn good. All 6’4 inches of pissed off male stops in front of me as his blue eyes pierce me like he’s trying to read every thought I’ve ever had.

Pretend you don’t know him. My brain is a crazy place sometimes because it feels like a solid plan.

“Hello, sir. How may I help you?”

“Don’t fucking play with me, Lilac. Where is my sister-in-law?”

The ladies titter because they’ve never seen a man breathe in my direction, but Timmy better back the pluck up. I don’t care how good he smells. Sidestepping him, I move towards the podium.

“Who?” I ask as casually as possible.

“Lei-fucking-lani.”

I look over my shoulder as if I'm just realizing who he is for the first time. If I'm being honest, it'd be hard to forget his stupid perfect face. I thought his hair was brown, but it looks blonder now and is combed to perfection like I did it myself. His beard suggests he likes face rides but his jaw is set to the tune of don't try me. He would be gorgeous if I didn't want to fight him.

"Ah, you're Ambrose's brother. Nice to meet you." We've met, but I'm not going to act like we have.

"Lavender, I'm trying to be nice here," he warns with a firm voice.

Spinning on my heels to confront him, I collide with his hard chest but quickly right myself.

"VIOLET," I correct him, matching his attitude. "And I am not doing anything in any way with you. Now if you'll excuse me, I have a *members only* meeting to conduct." Dismissing him, I move to the circle and sit down. "Sorry, ladies. I..."

My words stop when he sits in the chair next to me. Some of the girls giggle, but I'm ready to call the cops.

"Why are you still here?"

Timothy folds his arms and fixes me with an icy stare. "As you said, the meeting has started."

"What does that have to do with you?"

A slow, grinch-like smile spreads across his face. "I joined."

"You don't have a plant name."

We're in a full-blown glaring contest, like I'm not supposed to be conducting a meeting.

"*Timothy* is a plant name. It's a type of grass," he points out, challenging me. I look over at Ivy who nods to confirm his claim. "I could argue I have more rights to be here than you if we're going by plant names, my last name is Heywood, Miss *Stokes*."

"Then start your own club. This is for women only."

He holds up a long finger. “It doesn’t say that in your bylaws. I only have to be a Santa Barbara resident and have a plant name.”

I clench my jaw as I stare at him. My whole organization is falling apart in front of my eyes. It may seem like I’m dramatic due to my hate of disorder, but he’s killing me.

“It’s called the PLUCKING LADIES for pluck’s sake.”

He calmly shrugs. “And I like to *pluck* ladies.”

His comment makes my body tingle, which only adds to my irritation.

“No, we are plucking *ladies*. We’re not out there *plucking* ladies.” Leave it to him to twist it in a way I never considered.

“I *guess* I’m a plucking lady,” he volleys as he stretches out his legs and crosses them, showing no signs of leaving. “Unless you’re going to try to enforce something that is only implied and not explicit. What would your contract lawyer friends think about that?”

I feel a headache forming. “It’s a *women’s* club!”

Timothy shakes his head. “And here I thought we lived in a more progressive world. You sound sexist to me. If I took this to court, would I have a case, *counselor*?”

He would. It’s official, I hate him. Timothy Heywood just started a war.

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CHAPTER 4

TIMOTHY

SANTA BARBARA IS A NICE TOWN, WHICH IS GOOD SINCE I'M going to be here putting pressure on Violet until Leilani appears. I have no proof beyond a feeling. I know she's here.

"This is harassment," Violet complains like I care.

She flips some of her long braids over her shoulder as she gives me a brown-eyed stare that's supposed to be unnerving and folds her arms across her slender body. She's what others would call slim-thick. While she's a slender woman, the peach body contouring dress shows curves one would think she doesn't have. I don't care about her curves. She needs to stop helping her friend fuck with my brother.

"I'm simply stacking chairs. Other members are helping."

If I had to judge by the other women, my intrusion is funny yet awkward. Good. Maybe one of them can confirm Leilani is here. I'll make Violet uncomfortable until I get my way.

She huffs and walks away, grumbling to herself about contract oversights and rookie mistakes. I'm not a lawyer, but I've spent years looking for loopholes, so I'm pretty good at finding them.

She needs to be happy that I moved in on the outskirts in a big house and not into a condo in her same building. I know the difference between pressure and harassment. She won't be able to prove it.

Violet pivots on her heels and stomps her way back to me.

"I know what you're trying to pull, *Timmy*."

After stacking the last chair, I turn to give her my full attention. Leaning, I get into her space until we're almost eye to eye.

“Have I been inside your pussy?”

“No!” Violet gasps in horror like I asked her to spread her legs.

“Then don't give me nicknames. Only call me Timothy or Mr. Heywood. Be careful how you use my last name; I might make you kneel.”

The idea sounds more appealing than it should. I'm mad my mind went there. I'm here for answers. Not for sex. It may be due to my decision to find someone to call mine. My brain is looking in places it shouldn't.

Defiance flashes on her earthy orbs and warms my blood. I love pushback.

“I kneel for no one.”

Ohh, that almost made me hard.

“Be quiet and walk away Violet before I put effort into proving you wrong.”

We stand off for a few more seconds. Disappointment surprises me when she walks away. I was starting to look forward to seeing her pouty lips wrapped around my cock.

It's for the best. I'm only on the west coast to help Ambrose.

There weren't any more incidents. Clean up was complete in ten minutes and I even carried the rest of the wine to Violet's car.

I'm not surprised that she didn't thank me and instead opted to jump in her car and lock the door before I could say anything else.

Chuckling, I pull out my phone and call her.

“Hello?”

The confusion in her voice proves she doesn't recognize my number. It's to be expected. I never had a reason to have her number or call.

"This will be easier if you tell Leilani to call her husband."

"Leave me alone. This has nothing to do with us."

"That was true until you lied to my brother."

Our eyes meet through her rearview mirror.

"Whatever is going on is between them."

"If Leilani can have backup, so can Brody. Tell her that I'm extremely disappointed."

I hang up and head to my SUV. The details of their tiff are of no concern to me, but the fact that she ran away like this with no intention of giving Ambrose a say in anything or allowing him to fix it hurts. I accepted her as a sister the moment Ambrose told me she was the one.

You don't turn your back on family. Even if she lost her mind. I'm going to shake her back to sanity if Brody doesn't.

My phone pings with an alert from my Hooked app. I have several notifications since it was on silent during the meeting. Apparently, there are local matches in the area, and for some reason, the reminder of my lack of a love life has me lifting my head to watch Violet drive off. Shaking my head, I focus on going home. I've accomplished a lot since I arrived this morning. Now, it's time for dinner and some sleep. My house isn't ready yet, but I'm happy I'm in a hotel this week. Room service sounds like a wonderful idea right now.

Checking in, I call up my brother.

"Did you find her?" His greeting is to the point like I like it.

"No, but I'm sure she's here. I'm putting pressure on Violet. I'm sure this will make her pop up."

"Pressure, how?"

"I'm infiltrating Violet's life. It'll smoke out Leilani for sure. I'll keep you posted."

I'm about to hang up, but he stops me.

"Tim?"

"Yes?"

"Thank you, man. I love you."

We don't use the sentiment all the time, but we know we love each other.

"I love you, too."

Traveling so often has skewed my sleep schedule, especially when jumping three hours behind. It's early as fuck California time, but I can't go back to sleep, I lie in bed, staring at the ceiling, debating if I should go to the gym or try to relax for once. My mind never seems to stop working, especially with my projects coming to fruition. My phone pings from a news app, but it reminds me of the notifications I ignored from Hooked. I don't know if I'm the online dating type, but I remember seeing that they have a new compatibility test feature.

Now would be just as good of a time as any to fill it out. A few years ago, I didn't think I was the marrying kind who'd want a family. Even Ambrose's happiness to be with Leilani didn't sway me. I laugh to myself with a head shake. Things have shifted so dramatically that now his marital woes aren't enough to scare me away from the idea of finding my other half.

I stretch in place and roll to my side. One of the perks of being awake earlier than most is the quietude. Sometimes, we need things to be still to refocus our energy. Another buzz brings my attention back to my phone and the questions on my face. Clearing my mind, I give all of my attention to the questions, making sure I give honest answers. There is no point in paying for a service if I'm not going to use it properly.

My stomach growls the moment I submit my answers, officially signaling the beginning of my day although it's still

six in the morning. My thoughts circle back to Violet. I'd met her once, when I was almost late to my own brother's wedding, fucking with customs and commercial flights. Luckily, I got there with enough time to shrug on my tux and collect the maid of honor. I saw the back of her first. Her body was wrapped in a long, mermaid cut dress. The lilac fabric hugged her hips and the backless style that cut to a V just above her ass, highlighted the graceful curve of her back and elongated her delicate neck. She was looking at something to her side, displaying her profile. I could tell she was cute, but when she turned to look at me, I knew she was beautiful. Her big brown eyes took me in as I introduced myself, then she spent the rest of the night talking about her boyfriend.

Violet looked damn good last night as well, a little thicker than she was five years ago, but in all the right places. Had we met in a different way, I would have asked her out. The knowledge doesn't surprise me. I may have forgotten her name, and I may have left the wedding without thinking about her again, but I never denied her attractiveness. The rest of her, however, annoys the shit out of me. No doubt her loyalty lies with Leilani, but she was supposed to be Ambrose's friend as well. For that, she'll remain on my shit list until this is all sorted.

For now, eggs benedict and grapefruit juice call my name.

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CHAPTER 5

VIOLET

THE MOMENT I WAS SURE THAT THE CRAZY MAN WASN'T following me, I stopped by Leilani's condo. I could have called her on her burner phone, but I didn't want to risk it. I waited out the night and at the crack of dawn I left my phone in my unit, since he has me paranoid, and went to hers.

"Biiiiitccchhhh," I say low as I push past her while she rubs the sleep out of her eyes. "We cannot pull this off any longer. We need to abort the mission. I repeat, abort mission. I'm not cut out for this. I might get hives."

Lei waves her hands to get my attention. "Wait! What happened?"

I look at her as I fan myself. "I was getting ready for the meeting like I always do and *Timothy*"—I whisper his name like he's a demon who can pop up at any mention of him—"came to my meeting demanding answers."

Lei makes an ouch face because she knows about the time he made me forget how to think.

"Oh, no. Did you at least remember how to talk this time?"

I set my hands on my hips and stare at her hard because that part should not be her focus. "Yes, and you should be more concerned that he's here and ready to drag your ass back to New Hampshire."

She nods slowly. "That's concerning, but I need to know how you handled it."

I drop down on the couch. “Oh, you’re so fucking annoying. I tried to pretend I didn’t know him.”

Leilani lets out a short hoot of laughter. “He walked you down the aisle, Vi.”

I cross my arms, annoyed with the entire situation. The first time I met him looking scrumptious in a tux, my brain went haywire and I started talking about the guy I broke up with a week before the wedding as if we were still together. I got nervous and didn’t know why. Those same butterflies attacked me last night, but I was better equipped to handle it.

“Yet, he still called me Lilac and Lavender.”

“Aw...” Leilani coos and she pats my thigh. “At least he knew you were named after a purple flower.”

I thump her hand. “Shut the hell up. I’m in this mess because of you. He *joined* the club. He *moved* here. I know he’s going to haunt me until you call Brody. I’m freaking out. This isn’t the life for me.”

“You’re a lawyer, Vi.”

“A contract lawyer! Plus, my opponents aren’t allowed to say shit like ‘Call me Mr. Heywood, and I’ll make you kneel.’ Or ‘have I been inside of your pussy?’ He’s evillll!”

Leilani looks up like she’s considering something. “You know, I heard through the grapevine that he has a few... kinks.”

Pouting, I pull my pajama top over my face and melt into the couch. Why does he have to be so seductive?

“He’s gonna eat me alive.”

Leilani shakes me. “Hold it together. You’re a grown 34-year-old woman. You are not gonna melt because some cute guy smiled at you.”

“That’s the thing, he hasn’t cracked not one smile and I feel *seduced*. And it’s not some cute guy...it’s *Timmy*.”

Leilani crosses her eyes. “Yeah, yeah, the most attractive man you’ve ever met. The same principle applies. Woman up,

you got this.”

“If I end up pregnant with the next Heywood, just know you asked me to fight my kryptonite. That child will look just like you because I will mean mug you. All. Nine. Months!”

Leilani is laughing a little too hard at my pain. “Just keep your legs and mouth closed for a little longer.”

I hold up a finger. “Or. ORRRRRR. You can call your *husband*. I’m on the partner track. He will set me back *decades*. I’ll have all of his children. Do you hear me? All of them. Just a bunch of half black mean ass Heywoods running around.” I take a pained breath. “And he still might not remember my name.”

I didn’t realize Leilani moved during my rant until she hands me a mimosa. “It’s Thursday. Take the day and recoup, then know you don’t have to see him until Wednesday. I’m sure you can find a chastity belt by then.”

“I feel like you’re laughing at my pain. I’m compelled to snitch. Why did you leave anyway? I can tell you never stopped loving him.”

Leilani looks sad again, and she presses her hands together. “Please, please, just buy me a little more time.”

I sigh hard. The confusion in her eyes is why I keep folding. “Fine, a friend of mine will be by to take you to a new place. Timothy is thorough. It’s only a matter of time before they realize that I own another condo.”

Leilani pulls me into another hug. “Thanks, Vi.”

“Yeah, don’t thank me yet. I could betray you before the day is over.” She giggles and shakes her head. “Garth won’t tell me where he put you so there can be some truth in my tone when I say I don’t know.”

I’ve been in deep hiding for two days. I took off Thursday and worked from home Friday. If I don’t leave, tall, mean, and

sexy can't ambush me. I'm too much of a planner to keep being caught off guard. He hasn't texted or anything and as long as I don't leave my condo, I can lie to myself. Meatloaf with some collard greens and yams from the diner up the street sounds more than promising right now. Opening up my food app, I place the order and dance in place as my taste buds fantasize about my upcoming meal.

Luckily, I'm used to not having Friday night plans, so this isn't new for me. In the estimated thirty-minute wait for my food, I took my shower and donned my pajamas for my movie marathon.

The knock on my door beckons me, making my smile grow bigger the closer I get to the door. My world tilts when I swing it open.

"You!" I hiss as Timothy hands me my food and pushes past me. "I didn't invite you inside."

He turns like he owns my condo and looks at me in my cherry patterned pajama shorts and tank.

"I'm not a vampire, I don't need an invitation. Oh, the things I could say about that set." His icy eyes trace up and down my body like he's touching me with his gaze. He abruptly turns and looks around my space. "She's not here, is she?"

I drop my food on the table and march in his direction. He's too sexy to be in my space. "I'm calling the police."

He flashes his phone at me. "Go ahead. I'm just a delivery guy doing his job. Be sure to give me five stars."

"I'd give you negative stars if I could."

He moves closer, his scent cloaking my senses just as his big body casts a shadow over me.

"Do you want to risk that?"

His threat makes my nipples bead and pisses me off. I'm not supposed to be turned on by threats.

"Why in the pluck is a Heywood delivering food?"

He shrugs and walks his way over to my food. “It’s a good way to learn the area and since time isn’t free, why not get paid to do it?”

It makes sense, but he’s still in my space. “I’m reporting you.”

He looks bored at my threat as he opens the box of food. “You can, they’ll fire me. And I’ll have a *lot* of free time.” His pointed glare roots me into place. “I’d have to fill all of that free time with a new *activity*.” He closes his eyes and sniffs my food like it’s seducing him. “Mmm.”

His groan has me crossing one leg over the other. *Pretend he’s ugly. Pretend he’s ugly.*

“Ah...” I try to speak, but my words are caught. The sound comes out like a strangled sigh.

Timothy studies me like he just discovered something new, but raises my food up. “Hungry?”

I am, but not for food.

“You’re invading my privacy. Get out.”

He rubs his finger over his bottom lip as his gaze... smolders. “Oh, Violet. If I were invading your *privacy*, you’d feel it.”

Timothy is in my space again. My breath hitches at his nearness. I’m about to break and tell him everything he wants to know. He tucks his finger under my chin to make me look up at him. The moment I do, his big hand wraps around the back of my neck, lurching me forward until I’m pressed tightly against his hard chest. His heart beats against my cheek and all my lady parts shudder.

His lips are near my ear when he speaks again. “Leilani better contact my brother soon.”

I feel cold when he lets me go and even colder when he leaves. Damn him.

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CHAPTER 6

TIMOTHY

I DON'T USUALLY TRUST COINCIDENCES, BUT THAT WAS ONE hell of a coincidence. I didn't lie to Violet. I always pick up some sort of job that forces me to learn new areas quickly; I didn't expect to get her order. I thought it worked in my favor until I got inside her condo and saw the micro shorts she called pajamas. Her braless nipples greeted me first and the desire she tried to fight followed.

Unfiltered reactions are the beauty of catching someone off guard. She's attracted to me. It makes my dick hard, and my mind conjures up so many ways to make that knowledge work in my favor. Maybe I can seduce the information out of her.

This truly is an unexpected turn of events. On that thought, I call up my brother before accepting another order.

"Did you let me come here because you knew Violet was attracted to me?"

"Well, hello to you too, brother," Brody grouses on the other end.

"I hear wind and engines," I point out without acknowledging his mood.

"I'm following a lead."

"Good, now answer my question."

"Yeah, I remember hearing that she thought you were hot, Leilani's words, but that was five years ago. Still figured it couldn't hurt."

"You knew I'd be impatient and come this way."

It's not a question. Brody has his manipulative moments. "It's harder for people to stonewall someone they'd want to fuck."

I shift in my seat at the thought. I'm not here for such things, but those cherry pajamas have me questioning my goals here. Do I get the information, the girl, or both?

"I see."

"Plus, you were checking her out at the wedding. It'd be easier for you to seduce her. Also, sex wouldn't hurt either of you."

"Just like me, you knew she was lying."

"From the moment she opened her mouth."

I nod, although he cannot see me. "Then it makes sense. You waited because you knew Leilani was fine."

"Yeah," he admits. "But I'm out of patience."

And that explains the mood.

"Well, I have boots on the ground. Let me know if you need anything."

"Will do. Thank you."

The line goes dead, leaving me alone with my thoughts. I stare out into the night, watching people pass on their way to God knows where. I turn off my delivery app, no longer interested in learning for the night. I've been on the move for what feels like my entire life. Instead of slowing down like I promised myself I would in Peru, I jumped on a plane to solve my brother's problems. I know he appreciates my help, but I didn't miss his implication that I needed to get laid. Fucking Violet doesn't sound like a bad idea, but there needs to be more than physical attraction to hold my interest. I drive off after throwing one last look at her building. It's not time to go back up. I'll solve this Leilani mystery then get to know her pain in the ass friend.

From: Violet@pluckingladiesgardenclub.com

To: Plucking Ladies Group

Good Morning Plucking Ladies,

I have our usual meeting spot reserved for Wednesday since there weren't any volunteers to host this week. As you know, hosting isn't a requirement since our usual spot will always be available. I don't want any of you trying to scramble to be ready if it's not anything you'd want to do. To make it easier, I've created a shared document for those who want to pick a day to host.

In other news, I do apologize for the intrusion at the last meeting. Please know I'm doing everything in my power to rectify the issue. Until then, please ignore any further disruptions.

Thank you,

Violet Stokes

I chuckle around my morning coffee. Violet woke up Monday morning choosing violence. She should have learned by now that it's not easy to get rid of me. Feeling slightly less passive aggressive than her, I hit reply all.

From: Timothy@pluckingladiesgardenclub.com

To: Plucking Ladies Group

Very funny, Violet. You know what I want.

Tim

Satisfied, I place my mug in the sink and strip off my towel to get dressed. My house will be ready and fully furnished by the

end-of-day tomorrow. My bed is the only thing I picked; I allowed the interior designer to choose the rest. One of the perks of having money is the ability to outsource the shit I don't want to do.

Opting to dress comfortably, I don jeans and an oatmeal thermal Henley. I have some things to check on for my products and some marketing to review, but it'll be a light workday.

My phone is flashing when I return to where I left it on the table. Smiling, I click on the email icon.

From: Violet@pluckingladiesgardenclub.com

To: Plucking Ladies Group

Leave me alone, Timmy. I don't know what you're talking about.

Oh, her insolence makes my dick hard. This time, I respond directly to her. A smile I didn't know I was sporting stays on my face the entire time I type out my reply.

From: Timothy@pluckingladiesgardenclub.com

To: Violet@pluckingladiesgardenclub.com

Violet,

You're mighty loud via email. Your words suggest that you do, in fact, want me to visit your pussy. I've already warned you.

Please call me Timmy the next time we're face to face and see what happens.

Final warning.

Timothy Heywood

I move on to my business at hand and have the labels picked out and finalize the name of our products. Another company is scheduled to pitch me new advertising since I hated the ones I saw after I emailed Violet. Two hours went by before I realized she never responded. That knowledge pulls a chuckle out of me and has me looking forward to the next meeting.

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CHAPTER 7

VIOLET

I'M SHOOK. NO, I'M SHOOKETH. I'M NO WILTING FLOWER; MY bedroom shenanigans have been fun despite my need to organize everything. Men have said dirty things to me, but *Timothy*. There is so much authority in his emails. It's just words on a screen, yet the energy is so...big dick. This is not gonna work. He needs to go all the way back to the other coast or a different country. *Somewhere*. To add insult to injury, he was the first to sign up to host the club meeting the Wednesday after next. I'm going to shake Leilani.

Queen plays in my head. I hear *Under Pressure* on repeat. Pulling up my browser, I start searching for flights to an island. I'm jumping ship. Every man and woman for themselves.

My office phone rings and scares the bejesus out of me. I stare at it for a while, wondering what I'd do if Timothy is calling. Finally shaking myself out of my stupor, I grab the handset and give a timid greeting.

"Vi-Violet Stokes speaking."

"Girl, why do you sound like you're in witness protection?"

"Because I'm about to be on the lam just like you," I hiss at Leilani.

"What did Timothy do now?"

I read the emails to her and my hidden friend is entirely too amused by my pain. "Be happy I don't know where you are now, Lei. I think we'd fight."

“Or...hear me out. Just fuck him and get it out of your system. What do you have to lose?”

“My *sanity*. I’m three seconds from calling Brody and giving him the number of your burner phone so he can call back his demon.”

Lei stops laughing and sobers up for a minute. “I’m sorry, Vi. When I left and came to you, I really wasn’t trying to cause any trouble for you.”

I don’t have to see her face to know she means it. I just wish I knew what the issue was between them. They were my glimpse of real love. I was born and raised in Houston, and while I’m close to both of my parents, they don’t fool with each other outside discussing their kids. Ambrose and Leilani were my hope for everlasting love, but every time I speak to either one of them, I feel like I’m in eighth grade all over again.

“I know. I just wish you two would talk to each other. If his brother is hounding me, that means he’s looking for you, right?”

“Yeah. It’s just...I don’t know.”

“Hey, Violet?” Phone forgotten, I’m halfway under my desk before I realize it’s Roy, one of the partners.

His brows furrow over his brown eyes while he studies me like I’ve lost my shit.

“Okay, fair enough. I’ll call you back.”

I hang up on Lei before she can respond. “Sorry, Roy, you scared me for some reason.”

I throw him my best unbothered smile, but I am bothered. Very bothered by an almost blond giant.

Your compatibility results are in! Meet us at our Friday night mixer to meet your match.

The message from Hooked has taunted me since I received it Tuesday night. I switch outfits for the 8th time as I once again mentally curse out my bestie for not being able to help me choose an outfit because she prefers to be deep undercover.

The idea of meeting my possible match is both exciting and terrifying. What if we're great on paper but have no chemistry or we're not attracted to each other. My mind goes back to Timothy. He was actually on his best behavior, listening to Ivy's presentation on the relationship with plants and skin care. He had the most questions for Ivy and got wrapped up in a discussion with Pansy about her hair products. I didn't hear the entire conversation because I took his distraction as the best time to make myself scarce. Hyacinth giggled as she watched me back my ass out, then run off when I was free. I needed to reboot my energy to tangle with that man.

My timer goes off, reminding me that I need to leave in the next five minutes to be on time. Dark washed skinny jeans and a purple fitted V-neck sweater it is. I slide into my ankle high heeled ankle boots and give a low twirl. Looks good. My braids flow to my waist and the makeup I hardly wear gives me a more sultry look. I just hope this mixer goes well.

I sling my crossbody purse diagonally on my body then ease my door open to peek left, then right. No sign of Timothy. Releasing a breath, I make my way to my car before I change my mind.

You wanted to date. You can't do that hiding in your house.

The thought carries me to my car and I jump in and lock the door like someone is following me. I can't handle a Timothy ambush right now. My shoulders relax the further I get from home.

It's good to get out there and meet new people. I didn't pine away for Timothy after meeting him at the wedding, so I'm not gonna do it now. I hope he sucks in bed. I arrive at the cute little space that is Hooked's Santa Barbara location and give my car to the valet. I hate looking for parking, I'd rather pay for it.

A few guys greet me with soft smiles while others wear their intentions on their sleeves. I sidestep Mr. Elevator eyes and head further in the event. A slightly younger but ridiculously attractive man picks up the microphone to get the attention of everyone present.

“Hello all. I’m Hardy. I know Ethan is usually the host for the event side of Hooked, but the compatibility portion is my baby. You are going to be a pilot group for the compatibility mixers. The way it’s set up is I’ll take the ladies to private rooms where they’ll wait for their match. Guys, you’ll get the key to the room. Each key only unlocks one door in the building. Find the right door, find your match.

He gives a megawatt smile that I know has dropped several panties. “Guys, don’t get any crazy ideas; there will be a server going in and out of each room periodically.” He holds up a finger. “I need everyone to remember no means no. It’s an old saying, but it’s still effective.”

Ethan and Hardy’s dedication to safety is one of the reasons why I chose Hooked over other dating apps. Leslie, the server for my room, triple checks my name and guides me to my assigned room.

Everything seems so real when the door closes. I hear men outside trying the lock. Each attempt spikes my anxiety. After about five minutes, I look at the service entrance and consider sneaking out. I’m so intent on considering my plan to escape that I didn’t hear the door open.

“Well, well, well. I had this view the first time we met as well.”

I slowly turn in horror just to verify that I’m now in a private room with the very guy I’ve been doing my best to dodge. Timothy.

“Ah, hell naw.”

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CHAPTER 8

TIMOTHY

I DIDN'T KNOW WHAT TO EXPECT WHEN I OPENED THE DOOR, but I was taken aback by the relief I felt at finding Violet on the other side. Purposely bothering her to get information has ensured that she's always on my mind. Now, I'm starting to believe she's on my mind for completely selfish reasons. I know I'm sexually attracted to her, but it's not the sexual tension I'm talking about. The more I bother her, the more I want to know more about her. That's something that's never happened.

“How did you do this?” She asks while looking at the door I just closed. It's pointless. I'm not letting her out. Like I said, I don't believe in coincidences. I truly believe we keep getting thrown together for a reason. “You want information this bad?”

“No. All I did was answer my questions honestly.” Every step I take forward equals a retreating step from Violet. “Where is the bravado you had in the email, Violet?”

“How did you know I used the app? Why would you orchestrate this?”

Her questions would hurt if she was accusing me of something I wouldn't do. I agree with her. I would put something like this together, but I didn't. I'm stuck on the fact that we actually matched.

“I didn't. I'm a paying customer just like you.”

She looks beautiful. Her hair is down, almost brushing her hips. She always has it up in some way or another; it was in a

high ponytail when I delivered her food that night. Her makeup is something new and her outfit, while simple, accentuates her figure. I'm pissed that she did all of that with an expectation to meet another man.

Violet folds her arms with a frown laced with a hint of hurt. "Bullshit."

A few steps have me in her space. Grabbing her chin, I force her to look at me. Her skin is soft and warm beneath my fingertips and her scent just makes me want to stay in her space until she can't take it anymore. I quickly realize that I want to make her feel a lot of things, but hurt isn't one of them. I don't play with people's emotions because I don't want anyone playing with mine.

"I know where you live and work. I'm part of your garden club. I don't need to do all of this to get you alone. We matched for real. No tricks on my end." I move back to give her space and point at the table. "Have a seat."

She still looks unsure as her eyes dart between both exits. "I don't know..."

"Park your ass in that seat right now, Violet."

She spurts like she's ready to talk back, but she at least has some of her color back. I wasn't one to believe that the universe speaks to me, but as I watch her sit down at the table, I have to admit I'm listening.

My phone vibrates in my pocket before I sit down. I fish it out and check the message as I lower myself into my seat.

Brody: Leilani is with me.

Me: Good.

Now that Ambrose and Leilani are together to work out their bullshit, I can focus on goading Violet to call me Timmy so I can fuck her senseless for the audacity.

Hooked provided different options of ways to spend time with our matches in the private spaces. Violet and I chose dinner. Well, technically, I chose dinner. Violet was still trying to plot her escape. She seemed surprised when I ordered her favorite wine, but it was just an observation that I made from the meetings.

She takes another sip of wine, pulling my attention to her lips. I want to taste them and the other ones. No, I want to taste all of her but she's skittish.

Violet is more relaxed than she was when I arrived, but her feet are still facing the exit, ready to run at any time.

"I don't know details about Leilani," she blurts out. "I know she's fine, okay?"

I slowly lick some of the wine that has collected on my bottom lip as I watch her interrogate herself.

"Hmm..." The sound I make is noncommittal.

She's trying to give me a little information while hiding that she knows much more. She may not know where Leilani is, but she damn sure knew how to find her before Ambrose did. For dinner, we were allowed to pick from a select menu or order something to be delivered to us.

I ordered the same meal she'd chosen when I'd gotten her delivery order. I only ordered one plate because I doubt she's going to eat much at all.

"What does that mean?" she asks with suspicious eyes. She should know squinting isn't intimidating.

"What does what mean?"

She points at me. "That sound you made. Like you don't believe me."

The server appears and places our order on the table. Rising from the small table, I move my chair until I'm directly next to her, facing her profile. Violet shrinks in her chair and bends away from me.

"Why are you so close?"

“Why are you so flustered?”

She sneaks a glance at me. “Because you’re so close.”

Ignoring her, I open the food. It smells just as delicious as it did at her place. Her stomach growls, but she pretends it didn’t happen. I collect some of the meatloaf on the fork and hold it up near her mouth.

“Eat.”

“You don’t ne-”

I put the food in her mouth in mid-sentence. Violet frowns at me while her jaw works to break down the meat.

“I don’t believe you. You’ve lied to my brother for months and to me since I’ve been here. For a lawyer, you’re pretty bad at it.”

“I’m telling the truth-” A piece of the sweet potato goes in her mouth next. “Stop that!” she says around bites. “I can feed myself.”

I shrug. “I rather feed you food than you feed me lies.”

Violet wrestles the fork out of my hand, and I let her. She drops it on the table, not realizing that she’s fully facing me now with her knees pressed together between my spread legs.

“This is the world’s strangest interrogation,” she complains with a scowl.

“It’s not an interrogation. You brought up Leilani. I showed up for a date.”

Violet, still skeptical, watches as I try the food. I hum low in my throat because it’s damn good.

“Date? Yeah, okay.”

“What would you think if I kissed you right now?”

Violet sits up straighter, ready to bolt. “I’d say that’s advanced interrogation.”

“Oh, and if I wanted to eat these sweet potatoes off of your pussy?”

Her skin flushes as she inhales sharply. “Biological warfare.”

She scoots away from me, crossing and uncrossing her legs, trying desperately to look and act casually.

“Is the Hooked app another way for you to learn about Santa Barbara?”

“No, I started signing up before I moved here.”

“To set up a social life?”

She waits while I chew for my answer. “No, I was serious when I signed up.”

“About what?” She’s cute when she’s curious and a little less frazzled. Her shoulders aren’t near her ears and she’s actually maintaining eye contact. Too bad my answer will fuck it all up.

“Finding my wife.”

Violet stands abruptly, finally attempting to flee. Too bad for her; she was too stunned to read the document we had to sign at the beginning of the date.

“I’ll see you on our next date,” I tell her right before she grabs the handle.

Violet slowly turns like a woman in a horror movie who suspects the killer is behind her.

“Next date?”

I chuckle. “Oh, Vi. I need you to start using your profession in your private life. You agreed to three dates with me.”

She looks like she’s stuck between being turned on and wanting to cry. I don’t know what scares her, but I’m amused. Her big brown eyes molest my body, but her mouth pouts.

I stand without bothering to hide the hard length of my dick pressing against my jeans.

“Saturday, next week. I’ll pick the activity.”

Violet crosses herself as she backs out the door.

“Are you even Catholic?”

“No, but I’ll be committed by the time I see you again.
Good day, sir.”

Echoes of my laughter follow her down the hall as I lower myself into the table and finish the meal in front of me. Violet has no idea how she just sparked my interest.

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CHAPTER 9

VIOLET

THAT'S IT, I'M MOVING TO CANADA. I'VE STARTED OVER before; I can do it again. First, a cold, cold shower. Timothy almost made me lose all of my religion when he proudly displayed what he had to offer. No guy has ever unnerved me before. My very well planned out life never anticipated such a massive curve ball.

Dates? Match? Wife? The universe has me messed up. I'm not some scarred woman or commitment-phobe, but Timothy scares the crap out of me. He's so...intense. I'd be a plucking Stepford wife messing with him. Brainwashed by his dick and never to be found again. I stop pacing as I considered something. Similar DNA...is this why Leilani is on the run? If Ambrose is anything like his big brother, God help us all.

Shower then pack. Yeah, that's the plan. If I found this job, I can get another one. I'm sure the Plucking Ladies will be fine without me. It's been real Santa Barbara.

He could show up where you go just like he did here.

"Pluckety, pluck! pluck! Pluck!"

I growl in frustration and kick my clothes hamper before I remember that I'm barefoot.

"Ouch!"

My foot throbs as I hop around my bedroom before tripping and falling on the floor. The shuddering impact knocked some sanity back into me. Sighing, I roll onto my back and stare at the ceiling.

“And if I wanted to eat these sweet potatoes off of your pussy?”

The memory of his question has me groaning in an empty room. I want to experience everything he’s offering but am not sure if it’s legit. It’s giving a ‘timeshare’ vibe to me. What if he seduces me and I tell him everything he wants to know about Leilani only to watch him walk away?

“No!” I say to my empty condo. “I’m not falling for it, no matter how bad I want to take a bite.”

I refuse to be a pawn. Timothy is going to have to find another way unless I beg Leilani to get him off my back. Another deep breath relaxes me more and eases some of my anxiety.

I’m a woman and Timothy is just a man. *What’s that saying about fear?* I sit on my floor for a solid minute, trying to remember it. Oh, well. I just know my brain is likely to make it a bigger deal than what’s actually occurring. One quote I actually remember came from my mother. I’ve always been organized, but my hyper-organization started around the divorce.

“Relax, baby girl. You can’t control life. It’s messy and out of order.”

I’ve heard her say it a thousand times, but this is the first time I’m considering listening. The advice may not had been geared towards my sex life, but that is something I can easily omit from my aha moment.

Raising my head high under the spray of my shower, I decide I’m gonna put on my extra big girl panties and face my 6’4, muscled, deep voice having, well groomed, and oozing sex appeal demon.

I feel like a new woman when I get out of the shower. I’m calm and ready for bed. I’m skipping television and aiming straight for the sweet dreams portion of the night. That is, until I was stupid enough to check my phone.

Timmy the Destroyer: I still have some sweet potatoes. I just need my plate.

Clenching my legs together, I whine in the dark, cursing him for the visual he just created. I had to take so many breaths, one would think I was in Lamaze training before responding.

Me: Try Target. They have a lot of options for all of your dinnerware needs.

I heard some of the girls talking about doing Yoga. I never tried since I wasn't sure I could quiet my mind long enough, but I really need the quiet now. Timothy's text sent my mind into erotic overdrive. I'd fallen asleep only to dream about him doing just what he promised.

I'd awakened so hot for him, I killed the charge on all three of my toys and still wasn't satisfied. I swear if we have sex, and he sucks, I'm going to shank him myself. My decision swings between yes and no, like a nonstop pendulum.

I walk around in a circle, antsy like a racehorse ready for the race. A serene lady with salt and pepper hair and a killer body greets us. Her soft voice holds a level of chill I aspire to reach one day soon. She almost instantly calms me.

I quickly add this class to my weekly calendar just in time to focus on the lesson. Every time I tensed or didn't achieve the pose properly, she'd correct me with a soothing voice and a warm hand. By the end, I was sore, yet relaxed. Things started to click into perspective as I suddenly understood the partner's speech about work/life balance.

Mentally, I erased my to-do list for the entire day. It felt good to wander aimlessly, choosing activities on the fly. I had a leisurely brunch alone but didn't feel lonely, then I walked into the spa with the highest customer satisfaction rating and purchased an entire day of pampering.

No checklist, agendas, forward planning. Nothing. Just me, plush robes, and champagne. Whatever is on fire just has to wait until I'm finished. As I was soaking in one of my

treatments, I had a thought that made me giggle. Timothy stressed me out so much, I relaxed.

I reached optimum bliss levels by the end of the day. Everything is smooth, oiled, waxed, and plucked. I didn't bother to put up my braids or turn on my phone. My only concern is eating and lounging in my pajamas. I don't care that it's just after 6PM; it's late enough for me.

I even picked up whistling on the elevator. My mother would hate it since she swore ladies never whistled indoors, but that's where my mood lies. Reality, however, is a bitch and hits me the moment I turn down my hallway.

Big-ass Timothy is pacing in front of my door. He just couldn't let me be great.

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CHAPTER 10

TIMOTHY

I KNOW VIOLET IS UPTIGHT, SO IT USUALLY MAKES HER dependable or at least somewhat predictable. After my lengthy laugh over her response from the night before, I texted her this morning. I figured she was doing her freaking out and ignoring me thing, but hours of radio silence made me nervous. Verifying that she didn't do any of her usual activities today turned curiosity into worry. We're still getting to know each other and it's not my place, but her absence started to stress me out.

She rounds the corner in an amazing mood and glowing, and now I'm not sure if there is some guy I have to kill. That thought brings me to the level just above acting normal.

"Where in the hell have you been?"

Her expression screams, 'You're not my daddy,' but I can't care about that right now.

"Minding my grown ass business." Her response is all attitude. I almost smile. Almost.

"As it is your right, but turn on your fucking phone."

Her head snaps back in my direction from unlocking her door to frown at me. "I don't have to do a damn thing. You don't pay my phone bill. No money, no say. The pluck?"

My relief that she's alright has me acting out of character, yet I can't say three simple words. *I was worried.*

I usher her inside her home and close the door. She gasps when I pull her flush against my body. I'm thoroughly

invading her space and am loving every second of it.

“If I paid the bill, then you’d only get to answer for me. No other man but family would have your phone number.” I cup her cheeks and lock her in a stare. “You still want me to pay for it?”

Violet swallows visibly as her eyes display her internal war. I don’t want her to fight with herself. If she’s going to be in my bed, she better damn well be sure it’s what she wants. I don’t fuck for fun anymore.

I grab my wallet from my jacket pocket and produce a card with no limit. Holding her gaze, I slide the corner of it under her ear, down the side of her neck, and through the valley of her breasts.

“You can buy whatever you want, but money won’t be the price.”

“Oh, God,” she moans before she can stop it from coming out of her mouth.

“I could make you moan like that all night.”

My promise knocks her out of her stupor, and she pushes me away.

“Why are you here, caveman?”

I give her space and adjust my hard cock before sitting in one of her chairs.

“Our date starts in thirty minutes.”

“Thirty minutes! You said next week.”

I shrug. “Yeah, well, the activity I wanted to do with you is today, and I called...Get ready. Wear something easily removable.” I hold up my finger because she’s about to give me attitude. “With a bikini underneath.”

“Are we getting wet?”

I lick my lips as I look at her body. “God, I hope so.” We stare at each other for a bit, her stubbornness sticking out more until I speak again. “Either you get yourself dressed or I’ll dress you myself.”

She scurries away when I lean forward like I'm about to stand up.

"I'm starting to think the Heywood boys weren't taught boundaries," she yells from her room. "It would explain a lot."

Violet is a mixed bag. One minute, she acts terrified of me, and the next, she's challenging me. I think I've gotten the formula, though. She continues to talk shit about how intrusive we are, but I'm sure I can shut her up.

"We'll see if I change after we get married."

I do my best not to laugh at the silence. A full ten minutes go by without a word from her.

"Hurry up, Violet, before I come get you."

"You're supposed to wait for permission."

"I'm not a fucking vampire. You have one minute."

Her grumbles are indistinct, but I know she's complaining again. Finally, she comes out in a green long-sleeve shirt dress that stops mid-thigh and some slide-on sandals. I want to get on my fucking knees and explore her body. She shifts her weight because I'm staring at her legs for too long, imagining them being wrapped around my head.

"Ready?" she squeaks.

Violet is so damn cute when she's nervous. She's about to be beautiful because I'm about to take her completely out of her comfort zone. I'm going to love every minute of it.

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CHAPTER 11

VIOLET

WITH AS RICH AS THE HEYWOODS ARE, I'D PREFER FOR Timothy to have a driver. No, I'm not being snooty. I'm being tortured. I should not be subjected to watching him drive, looking like a meal only made for me. He gets on my damn nerves. His shorts show off his toned legs, and he has a habit of rubbing his fingertips over his lips as he drives. I want to rub something else on them.

His cerulean eyes flicker in my direction, but the brief encounter is full of seduction. My body heats, ready to give him offspring every time he looks at me like that. I adhere myself to the door because I don't want to slip and fall on his dick.

"Where are we going?"

"You'll see when we get there."

I stick my tongue out while making a face at his profile, but he sees me anyway.

"Put your tongue away unless you're offering to taste my cock. I'll show you the proper way to use it."

I cross my legs with an inward groan. "Why do you do that?"

"Do what?" He looks at me since we're at a red light.

"Threaten me with sex."

He has a slight dimple when he smirks. "It's not a threat." His eyes drop back to my legs, then move slowly up my torso

until they stop at my cleavage. “We can drop the date right now and go back to your place. Or mine.”

“Why didn’t you want to be CEO?”

My brain misfires again, moving to a subject so far from the current one, they should be in different countries.

He moves forward now that the light is green, but doesn’t answer me immediately.

“Answer me first and I’ll tell you anything you want to know.”

I nod timidly because there is no telling what will come out of his mouth. “Why do I scare you?”

His question makes the butterflies in my belly riot. I try to wrap my mind around telling him the whole truth and overly exposing myself. I wasn’t sitting around for five years hoping he’d notice me, but seeing him did have a major impact at the time. It’s best to give him the partial truth.

“*You* don’t scare me, per se. You’re intense and the Heywood vortex is concerning.”

He pulls up near the curb and we get out for the valet. Bypassing people who are all celebrating the weekend. Timothy picks up the subject once he’s in earshot.

“Heywood vortex?”

I nod and push a braid back over my shoulder. “You know. The part where being a Heywood is a full-time job to the point where it consumes everything about a person who marries into the family. Like would I be Violet Stokes, who’s a lawyer, or just Violet, wife of a Heywood?”

He nods slowly. “Wow, you thought far into the future. We’re on our second date.”

“Life is like chess; you have to think ahead and strategize. Besides, you just said last night you were looking for your wife.”

He opens a door and I walk in without looking because for the first time since he arrived, we’re not having a battle of

wills.

“Fair enough.” He stops in the empty hallway and turns to face me. “Then I should point out that if I were to get married, my wife’s dreams are my dreams. Her goals are ours. And not even my last name would keep her away from her passions. I’m looking for a life partner, not a society wife to giggle at dad jokes in The Hamptons. I want the full package. Love, support, and the kind of fucking that’d leave us breathless and confused. I know exactly what it’s like to be a Heywood and, to answer your question, that’s exactly why I didn’t take over. I didn’t like the idea of my job or mission in life being predetermined since birth. Succeed or fail, I’m my own damn man, so for me Heywood is just a surname just the way everyone else sees their last name.”

His response is so passionate that it’s damn seductive. My concern about the vortex is moot because I’m already sucked into his orbit. I don’t respond because I know he’s not finished.

“Like I said in the car, I’m not using sex as a weapon. I’m sexually attracted to you, Violet. And I would like to get to know you. The computer says we’re compatible. We should try.” Timothy cups my cheek and caresses it with his thumb. “I suggest you wrap that overactive brain of yours around one fact.”

I brave looking into his eyes. I feel like a snake facing a charmer. It’s his world, and I’m just trying to stay afloat.

“What’s that?”

His elusive dimple in his left cheek makes an appearance before he speaks. “I want you, Violet.”

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CHAPTER 12

VIOLET

MY BODY STILL TINGLES FROM TIMOTHY'S WORDS. IT FEELS like a sudden and out of the blue declaration. A couple of weeks ago, he was demanding information on Leilani and now he's lacing his fingers through mine and guiding me into a room with private booths that look like big dressing rooms without the doors.

The lawyer side of me wants to ask questions, but the woman in lust part of me is trying her best not to giggle. That alone is the scariest part about Timothy; he doesn't have to do much. Something about him beyond his looks makes me want to risk it all. I felt it five years ago; and it's tripled now.

He stops at one station but doesn't enter the little booth. Eventually, a few more duos show up followed by Ethan, the other half of Hooked.

"We're at another Hooked..." My question floats off as my brain catches up. I saw the advertisement but promptly ignored it since there was no one to take an erotic body painting class with me. "Oh, naww!"

Every bit of my Texan comes out in that one phrase, but Timothy's hand grips my hand harder when I try to back away.

"All that running isn't hurting your feet?"

I had a smart reply loaded, but something about the way his gaze bores into me tells me the mini truce we're having will dissolve. A part of me feels he's sincere with wanting to get to know me, the other part fears this is a different approach to getting in touch with Leilani.

Speaking of Leilani, I just realized she hasn't returned my call. Ethan's greeting catches my attention. Like Hardy, Ethan is damn handsome and makes me wonder what in the hell did they drink at their college? Maybe it's a college that manufactures overly attractive men.

I know for a fact that he isn't flirting, but every smirk is seductive.

"So, I know it's called erotic body painting, but this is more about foreplay and intimacy than sex. In case that isn't explicit. This isn't a sex party. NO SEX of any kind. Yes, that includes oral. You may, however, achieve whichever level of nudity you're comfortable with, hence the booths. There aren't any curtains or doors because we don't want to give you total privacy. Why? Please see the main rule. Again, no sex of any kind is allowed." Ethan drops into one of his sexy smiles. "Have fun, couples."

"We're not a couple," I mumble as Ethan leaves us to our own devices.

"That's what you think." My head snaps in Timothy's direction.

"What?" My ears must have malfunctioned.

Timothy pulls me into the booth, then turns me to face him. My butt rubs the table with the paints. Although there isn't anything behind Timothy to completely hide us from view, the panels on the sides make the space intimate just for us.

"You heard me, Vi." Ugh, his voice has dropped an octave and I've already named our first three children. I need someone to pull the fire alarm. "Are you trying to run again, or are you done being scared?"

There is a hint of challenge in his voice. That was all I needed for my competitive side to take form.

"I'm not scared. You're a bully."

His amused smile, displaying all his teeth, throws me for a loop. Timothy is gorgeous. He moistens his lips, but does it slow enough to mesmerize me before he responds

“Then fight back.”

“I-” Once again, he silences my actions.

Timothy’s shirt is off before I can breathe another word. His sculpted body is near, giving me an unobstructed view of every dip and shadow of his abs and the firmness of his chest. The v of his torso disappears beneath low riding shorts. My heart beats erratically like I’ve never seen a half-naked man before, but I work hard to continue taking calm breaths.

This can’t be happening.

I want to look away to regain my composure, but I see the challenge in his eyes. He wraps a warm hand around my wrist and places my palm on his bare chest. He’s so solid, warm, and smooth. I don’t know why I expected anything other than perfection under his shirt. If I’d set my expectations higher, I would not be so winded just from seeing him naked from the waist up.

“Touch me, Violet. Use the paint and explore my body.” With a low voice, and his warm breath on my cheek, he’s seduced me with two short sentences.

Hot damn. I don’t know if I just came or died.

Timidly, I add my other hand to his warm skin. He hums low in his throat but doesn’t move or try to control my exploration. When I met him all those years ago, I would have never thought we’d get to this point, in any capacity. During the wedding, I rambled and he was cold. After the wedding, we went our separate ways until he crashed my meeting and my life.

Timothy begins unbuttoning my shirt. He takes his time undoing each button, like we have all the time in the world. His fingertips graze my skin as he pushes the fabric off my shoulders. I’m standing in front of him in my bikini in a public place, yet I feel naked and wrapped in the intimate bubble he created.

He switches us and sits on the table in our booth with the paint and brushes to his right. Manspreading, Timothy opens his legs, then beckons me with a crooked finger. I move

between his thighs while avoiding looking down. I don't know how I'd act if his dick was hard and outlined in his shorts. His open thighs warm my hips as I reach for a brush.

All of my creative energy is gone so it takes me a while to pick a color since I don't know what to paint. His hands grip my hips, and his thumbs tease my sides.

“Pick anything, Violet.”

Opting for something basic, I dip the brush in the yellow paint and draw a sun around his nipple. Bolder, I get more paint and abandon the idea of making a picture. No, I just want to tease his body with the brush and watch his reaction. I must be doing something right to have Timothy's eyes glazed over and his lip sucked between his teeth.

I cover his torso with different swirls of colors, wishing I was finger painting but not daring to try. I circle his navel with the brush, and he dips his thumbs in his shorts and tugs downward until I can see where *he* begins. My hand stills as I stare at that area for an obscene amount of time. The head of his dick pokes against the fabric, looking for an exit.

“Want to see it, Vi? I can tell you're curious.”

I swallow hard, confused at the shyness he brings out of me. I would have told another guy to whip it out since he thinks he's so bad, but Timothy isn't posturing. It's a real question because he's confident about his body and has no qualms with me seeing all of him. Still, I don't have an answer. I'd bounce right up out of here if I was sure my legs worked for anything other than standing.

“Here,” he offers.

Timothy takes my free hand and runs it along the hard length of him, then slides off the table with my hand still pressed against it. Timothy doesn't rise to his full 6 feet and four inches; he's leaning with his forehead pressed against mine. He moves his head back to look me in the eyes, while his big hand completely covers mine. Timothy squeezes my hand, which wraps my palm around his fabric covered dick. Our fingers intertwine as he slides my hand down the length of

him, giving a tactile tour of the part of him that keeps popping into my fantasies.

We graze over the head of his dick, making his eyes flutter a little as a soft moan escapes his lips.

“Violet,” he sighs my name like he’s balls deep inside of me.

“Um...” I try to turn and leave, but he picks me up.

“Don’t you dare.” His growl is low and commanding.

I just melt. I pray that he cannot see how hard my nipples are. Timothy puts me on the table and steps between my legs like I was with him. There are major differences here. One, he still towers over me. Two, I have nothing to poke him with, and three, I don’t push his legs far apart and stare at the apex of his thighs.

Can he tell that I’m wet? Does he smell my arousal? I feel so exposed and realize that the only thing between him and my bare coochie is one tiny triangle.

Mayday. Pimp down. I’m in distress.

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CHAPTER 13

TIMOTHY

WHEN I SIGNED UP FOR THIS EVENT, I KNEW IT'D BE arousing. I was wrong, however, on what part of this would turn me on. I didn't expect being rock hard because Violet teased my body with paint and a brush. I wasn't planning to be so worked up that I'd be ready to tear her apart in public. Inwardly, I'm doing everything in my power to regain control and not get us kicked out.

On the way to Santa Barbara, I remembered that she was pretty, but I didn't expect her to get under my skin. Violet is on the table waiting to be painted, her lips are slightly parted, and her big eyes are wild with arousal. It's not my plan to fuck her today. She still has the doubt that doesn't sit well with me. *Did Leilani have that doubt?* Ambrose is methodical and had the patience and control to wait out Leilani. If I married Violet and she ran, I'd destroy cities just to drag her back and handcuff her to me if necessary.

I don't have that kind of patience. She watches me, waiting to see what I'm going to do to her. I'd prefer for my tongue to be the brush and my saliva to be the paint. Right now, I have to settle for the next best thing.

"Scoot your ass back." I push her legs up after she complies. "Keep your legs spread, but put your feet on the table and lean back."

I have her damn near positioned like I'm her gynecologist. While I'm not qualified to be her doctor, I can make her feel like my dick is the cure for everything. Grabbing one of the big towels, I fold it for cushion, and put it on the floor.

Dropping to my knees, I bring myself within kissing distance from the part of her I want to spend hours exploring. She whimpers a little when I lick my lips and inhale the sweet yet slightly musky scent that I caused.

Unlike her, I know exactly what I want to paint all over her body. I even verified that they'd have the clear UV paint. I mix the bottles labeled red and blue, unsure of what shade of purple it'll be. It doesn't matter as long as it's purple.

Violet shivers when I rub my bearded cheek against her inner thigh.

“Ready?”

The other couples must be getting wilder since the low music is turned up a little higher. I was so into Violet and what she was doing, I'd forgotten about them. Violet pushes her braids behind her and gives me a tight nod. I start painting her shin to relax her and inch my way up to her inner thigh. Her breath catches when I move the triangle enough to paint along the crease where her thigh meets her pussy.

After completing both legs, I blow on certain spots to help dry the paint. Violet's eyes roll back a little before she closes them. Fuck, the things I want to do to her. We have to get out of here before I go back on every plan I have.

I stand, keeping myself in the valley of her thighs. Our bodies are pressed together while I unapologetically finish my work on her lower belly, knowing my erection is poking her where we both want it to enter. Violet squirms a little, secretly seeking the friction we both crave. I wrap my left arm around her thigh and grind into her to give her what she needs.

Her hand flies over her mouth as her eyes flutter closed.

“There will be none of that when I fuck you, Violet. You owe me every sound you'll make. I'll accept nothing less.”

She blinks rapidly and chews on her bottom lip without responding. I don't need her to respond. She understands my expectations. When the time comes, I'll remind her if she ever dares to forget.

I finish just beneath her breasts and pull her up to a sitting position. Her lips are so close, I can almost taste them. I just know if I go there, I can't get back. This event isn't the place or time for everything I want to do to her.

I add to her arms, her neck, and then the swell of her breasts. I look at her, silently asking permission to reveal more skin as the tip of my fingers slowly pull down one of her straps. Violet's back is erect, but she doesn't protest when one of her areolas comes into view. Changing the position of my hand, I tuck my finger in the top of her bikini top cup and tug just enough to make one pert nipple pop out.

Damn, my mouth waters. Quickly, I gather more paint on the brush and paint across her breast, circling that one nipple when I'm done.

“Safe word!”

My gaze floats up from her nipple to her eyes. “You want one.”

She shakes her head, and she pushes me away. “Safe word is my safe word.”

I chuckle but allow her to end the date since I accomplished what I wanted. While she's still a little jumpy, she's not acting like I'm terrifying. Besides, this was foreplay. I can't wait to make her beg.

Violet's curious nature makes it impossible for her to look away while I readjust my cock so I'm not saluting others. After my shirt is where it belongs, I pull her out of the booth. Some couples are in full make out mode as we pass and I'm sure at least one broke some of the rules.

I don't have a problem crossing lines either, but it's not like this is a sex club with an NDA. Violet is a lawyer, and I'm part of a very public family. Such incidents always shine the woman in the worst light.

She's quiet as she dresses and follows me to the valet. “Would you like to eat?” I ask the question despite knowing the answer.

“I’m good,” she says on a near squeak as she stares out the window.

The ride is quiet as we’re both lost in our own thoughts. Violet looks surprised when I park but there is no need. I want her to the point of pain, but must get her past her internal panic. She gets out as I grab an important tool for the night.

“I’m just walking you up,” I explain when I fall in step. We pass a few people but not as many as I thought would be out and about on a Saturday night. I pull her to me once we’re in front of her door. “I’m curious to see what our next date will be.”

She snorts and shakes her head. “You and me both.”

I laugh. Violet studies me as I chuckle. I get it, I don’t laugh often. “No, just me. You’re planning it.”

Her already big eyes grow, and she points at herself. “Moi?”

“Yes. Hooked covered the first. I did the second. Now it’s your turn.”

She nods slowly. I’ve just given her something she can handle, something to organize. I give her the little bag in my hand and move forward. Violet blushes when I grab her cheeks.

“Tonight was fun.” I kiss her forehead and step back.

“What’s this?”

“A black light lightbulb. How else are you going to see your body paint?” Violet looks at her body, as if just remembering that I painted it. “Goodnight, Violet.”

I don’t wait for her to respond. I must leave before I invite myself into her home and pussy.

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CHAPTER 14

VIOLET

TIMOTHY HAS MY BODY ON FIRE TO THE POINT THAT HIS KISS to my forehead was a thrill. I'm glad he walked away because I was seconds from pulling him inside of my apartment where I would have allowed him to do any and everything he wanted. There would be no turning back from that. He'd have to marry me if he's as advertised.

I check my phone, looking past the personal and work emails to see if I have any text messages.

Where in the hell is Leilani?

Trying again, I dial her number and hold the phone with my shoulder and cheek and I try to unbutton my shirt. The bag he handed me is making my task harder than it needs to be. I put it down on my bathroom counter just as the phone rolls over to voicemail.

"Hey, Lei. I'm checking on you. Please call me back to let me know you're okay. It's not like I can pop up on you. I don't know where you are."

I'm doing my best not to overreact just yet. I know she'll get into a mediation kick and start looking at cases or disputes, then go down a rabbit hole considering different ways to argue her point. She could also be having a day like I had where it felt great to be unplugged.

I tilt my head as I look in the mirror. Now that the shock of him waiting for me outside of my home has worn off, I'm inclined to believe that he was worried. Shaking my head, I

dismiss the idea. If anything, we probably thought Leilani and I were on the run together.

My curiosity shifts back to the bag. He told me it was a UV light to see my paint. I get that. The crazy part is Timothy already having the light to give me. The UV paint was planned. Knowing that he planned it makes me nervous to discover what's on my body.

With the bulb in hand, my shirt and bikini meet the laundry basket on my way out of the bathroom. I swap the lightbulbs in the lamp next to the full body mirror just as a text comes in on my phone. I rush over and snatch it up, hoping it's from Leilani.

My disappointment is short-lived when I open a picture of Timothy completely nude with his big hand strategically covering his junk. I almost lick my phone.

Timmy the Destroyer: I thought you'd want to see your art.

No, I want him to move his hand so I can see God's art.

Me: So this is how you thirst trap?

Timmy the Destroyer: Are you thirsty?

Very.

Me: Just had some water, thanks for asking.

He sends another picture with the paint on his side. His junk is still covered, but I see the profile of his ass. I almost ask him to drop his pin.

Me: Cool. So are you about to shower, or are you just walking around naked for fun?

Timmy the Destroyer: Shower. You'll know when I'm naked for fun.

Note to self: Move and change phone number.

Timmy the Destroyer: I want to see my work.

Me: I haven't seen it yet, just switched the bulbs. Hold on.

My phone rings with a video call request. I roll my eyes, but answer anyway.

“You’re awfully impatient.”

Timothy’s eyes rake over my face. “Kill the lights and let me see.”

Something must be wrong with my cell service because I felt that request. I turn off the lights, then turn on the lamp. I inhale from surprise for two reasons. One, I’m now convinced that Timothy is out of his mind. Two, I must be equally crazy because it’s an arousing sight.

“Don’t be selfish, switch the camera view.”

“Have you lost your mind?”

He smirks, one of the flirty ones meant for seduction. I’m glad he’s all the way at his house. “I’m in my right mind. The quicker you understand it, the better. Let me see.”

His tone is a blend of excitement and impatience. I don’t bother with my breasts since he got an up close and personal look of one, but use my hand to cover the part of me he hasn’t officially met yet.

If I had to summarize his “design,” I’d say he used paint to ‘claim’ me. His half growl, half moan makes me shiver.

“Fuck, that’s hotter than I imagined.”

I turn a little to show him my hip. “What is that supposed to be?”

“A flag with TH inside.”

“Why?”

“Do you remember in history when an explorer would discover new land. They’d plant a flag with their logo to claim the new discovery.”

“My body isn’t newly discovered.”

“I say it is, and you get the point.”

“How could I not since you wrote your name all over my body.” Keeping my lady parts covered, I lift my leg to show

him his signature on my inner thigh. “And the arrow you painted pointing to the part that I’m covering with the word ‘mine’ next to it is hard to miss.”

“Mine” is painted on the right side of my bikini area with his name on the left side.

“How does it feel to have me all over you?”

“Uh...” I almost choke on air because Timothy is so direct. I’m not used to it.

I’m still trying to get over having his name written all over my body. He’d even used my nipple as a dot to the ‘I’ in his name.

“This is why I gave you the lightbulb. Had I tried to see it in person, my tongue would feel inclined to compete with the paint and take a long detour south.”

My pussy clenches at the thought of his tongue being buried inside of it. It’s been so damn long. Timothy is so damn good at throwing me into a state of longing.

“I hope this washes off. I have a brunch date tomorrow.”

“No, you don’t, because if you did, I’d have to burn down the restaurant.”

“Tim-”

“I’m serious.”

I’d die if this is some extreme tactic to get Leilani’s new number.

“What do you want from me?”

“I’ve told you many times, you just have to listen to me. I’m the only one you date. Read your body.” Only he would take this extreme measure for a declaration. “Be ready by nine tomorrow morning,” he continues. “I’ll pick you up by then.”

“Why?”

He looks at the phone and the way his eyes pierce me is no less intense than when he’s in person.

“Because that’s the only fucking way you’re getting brunch.”

The line goes blank before I can respond. The caveman is cave-manning again.

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CHAPTER 15

VIOLET

SOMETIMES A WOMAN MUST HAVE A CONVERSATION WITH herself. I told myself I'm not getting out of this with my legs closed. Therefore, I was standing outside at 8:50, waiting for a brunch breakfast I originally didn't have planned.

I feel like an amateur surfer in a huge ocean, but one piece of logic remains, don't fight the wave. There are, however, ways to work around it. I hope he's cleared his schedule because I'm going to act like Timmy and hijack his day.

We'll do relaxing stuff that isn't sexually charged and my obligatory third date will be done. I don't have to wait long until he pulls up and gets out. It's unnecessary since I have to get in, but I'll let him do it his way.

I realize my mistake when he appears from the other side of his vehicle. His brownish blond hair is free of product and softly touches his ears and frames his face. The contrast of his hair and beard brings out the blue of his eyes more. I narrow my eyes at him because he has the nerve to be wearing charcoal joggers and a light gray, long sleeve Henley that isn't buttoned and showing the top of his chest.

Timothy looks like the breakfast.

"Did you sleep well?" he asks before leaning down and kissing me on the cheek.

Nope. Too many sex dreams.

"I guess. You?"

He opens the door for me and waits until I climb in to close it. Soon I remember that I take issue with him driving. He looks damn good behind the wheel.

“Peacefully.”

“Huh,” I look him in the eyes; I lost track of the conversation.

Timothy throws me a flirty smile. “Stop it. I’m not used to that.”

“Used to what?” His eyebrow moves up a notch with the question.

“You smiling.”

Timothy chuckles with a head shake, then navigates his way into traffic. “You’re funny.”

“Am I? I didn’t tell a joke.”

“No, but you’re cute with your little quirks.”

I fold my arms and look at his profile. “What quirks?”

“You’re flustered because I smiled, for one. Two, you’re known to try to bolt at this point.”

“They’re not my quirks,” I explain with a laugh. “They are specific to you.”

“Should I be offended or flattered.”

“You can be whatever you want-”

He shuts me up by dropping his hand on my thigh and squeezing. Minutes go by without a word from me, yet his smile gets bigger.

“Admit you want me, Vi. It’ll be easier for you.”

“For *me*?” I question him with a tip of my head. “How is it easier for me?”

His eyes find me again, but roam slowly over my body. “You can admit it on your own, or I’ll do everything I can to pry it out of you.”

My gasp deepens his smile. “I told you, you were a bully. I guess you’re cute or whatever.”

Timothy laughs until he parks in front of a waterfront restaurant. “My way it is.” He leans over until his mouth is a hair from my ear. “This will be fun.” He’s back in his position in his chair when he speaks again. ‘Let’s go get you some French toast.’”

I happily jump out of the SUV because that’s exactly what I want, then stop abruptly, causing Timothy to run into my back.

“Forgot how to walk?” he grumbles. Heat from his hands warms my hips from his grip. “Fuck, I could have painted your ass too, but things would have gotten out of hand.”

I ignore his statement and closeness.

“How did you know I want French toast?”

“When you did all that yapping about your boyfriend, you mentioned him being really bad at making your favorite breakfast. Then you ordered it at the farewell brunch the next day.”

I turn to look at him, and he doesn’t move back. Timothy simply repositions his hands on my hips while waiting for me to speak.

“You remembered that?”

“Yes, but mainly because you kept moaning when you ate it, and I almost offered to compete with the toast for the most moans.”

Timothy grabs my hand and leads me into the restaurant like what he just said was normal.

Despite living here for almost three years, I’ve never been to this restaurant. It serves as a reminder that I need to slow down and learn my home city.

It’s beautiful here,” I admit, looking out at the almost sapphire water and white sand. It’s the kind of early morning I’d love to have with my man, with mild weather and a leisurely meal. Perfection.

We study the menu silently and I like that he isn't trying to fill the time with unnecessary small talk. Timothy doesn't pick up the conversation after we order.

"So, I know why Leilani wanted to study law-"

"You do?"

He nods, surprised by my question.

"Yeah, she's my sister-in-law."

I shrug. "I didn't think you spoke to her."

His frown displays his confusion with my assumption. Leilani and I hardly talked about Timothy outside of the amount of time he spent out of the country.

"Of course I have. She's family and I'm serious about family."

"I noticed. You did move here to shake me down. You even joined a club that you have no interest in just to bug me."

"That's where you're wrong. It's hard to be a Heywood and not respect nature. Plus, the Plucking Ladies are great." He pauses and looks me in the eyes. "Their leader is the problem. She has a fucking attitude."

His dry humor catches me off guard, sending me into a fit of laughter. Timothy cracks a smile and joins me. Laughing together is new. Even if he's still looking for information that I don't have, I know his laugh is genuine, and sexy.

The server puts our food down and the sight of the glorious mound of French toast makes my mouth water.

"Like I was saying, why did you want to study law?" he asks around a bite of his bacon.

"Well," I stop talking and laugh a little. "I've always been called argumentative as far as I can remember."

"I can see that," he teases with a smirk.

I wave him off and finish my answer. "Anyway, I figured I may as well get paid for natural talent. After some debate about my career choice in undergrad, I decided to go for it. It's

tedious, but my organizational skills and ability to focus came in handy.”

“And your choice in specialty?”

I hold up my hand to tell him to hold that question. I watched the butter slide off one slice onto another. It’s a fucking sexy sight. I grab the warm syrup and Timothy pushes an empty plate forward before I could look for one. My head snaps up, and he answers me before I can ask.

“It was one of the weirdest things I’d ever seen. I remember thinking, ‘who needs their own plate just for syrup?’”

“I usually don’t finish, and I don’t want the rest to be soggy.”

I don’t know why, but it makes me warm inside knowing that he noticed and retained small things from five years ago. It makes me feel that I made some kind of impression on him.

“What other random thing do you remember about me?” I blurt out the question before I could talk myself out of it.

“I don’t know,” he responds. I watch him stick a waffle triangle in his mouth, then clean his lips with his tongue. “You consider yourself the unofficial line dance captain because it irked you that some of my family didn’t know them.”

I burst out laughing, then take a sip of my water. Bless their souls, those babies were lost.

“That would be one of the things you remember.”

“I remember because you helped during the wedding because you didn’t like the organizational skills of the planner. So you spent a lot of the wedding fussing over details. Those line dances were the first time you relaxed the entire night. You looked beautiful living in the moment and not worrying over bullshit.”

I feel a blush forming, but I hide behind scooping myself a forkful of eggs. “And here I thought I’d bored you to death.”

“No, all the obsessing over minute details and endlessly talking about your boyfriend is what annoyed me. I thought

you were beautiful the moment I met you and my opinion hasn't changed.”

I don't know what the fuck is wrong with me, but I fight hard not to giggle. “Thank you.”

That's all I had; my mind went blank. We eat a little more before I make an announcement.

“I hope your schedule is clear because the third date is happening after brunch.”

Timothy takes a hearty drink of his water, then licks some of the errant drops off his lips. I want his lips all over me.

“It's already clear. I don't have anything to do. If anything, I would have made some deliveries if I'd gotten bored. I knew it was possible you'd plan it in under twenty-four hours.”

“How familiar are you with Santa Barbara now?” I ask, happy to be in his business.

He waves his hand from side to side. “Pretty good. I admit, I haven't been doing as many deliveries as I planned. I keep getting...” his eyes drop to my cleavage in my V-cut shirt, reminding me that he saw my breasts last night. My body warms up, immediately preparing for a visit from him. “Distracted.”

“Well, it'll just be for the rest of the day.”

He sits back in his chair and opens his arms. “I'm all yours.”

I know for a fact that his statement had eight million alternate meanings, but can I trust all of them? Glancing down at my phone, I stifle a frown when I confirm I still don't have a message from Leilani. I'm beginning to worry. I'll give her until tonight. Shaking it off, I smirk at Timothy and push my plate aside, knowing it's getting packed up and coming with me.

“Then let's go.”

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CHAPTER 16

TIMOTHY

ME: LET THAT WOMAN ANSWER HER PHONE, FUCKER.

Ambrose: No

Me: Violet's getting worried.

Ambrose: Aw.

I can hear all the sardonicism in his tone through text.

Ambrose: Tell Violet I don't know where Leilani is.

I choke back a laugh. My brother is being a shit, but it's true. Violet did help Leilani hide from him for months. It's a fair turnabout. I saw the concern on Violet's face during breakfast. For the first time since Leilani ran off, Violet truly doesn't know where she has gone. Knowing my brother, he cut off all communications, but he needs to make her look a lot less kidnapped. It'll be hard

After breakfast, we sat on the patio of the restaurant and watched the beach as we talked over brunch drinks. She told me things about her family, like she is the youngest of three sisters, all with plant names.

Now, we're walking through a famous garden, looking at the vast array of plants and flowers. To be honest, Violet is looking at plants and flowers, and I'm looking at her ass. It's an amazing ass, especially in those tight denim leggings. I knew we were going to do something that requires a lot of walking when I saw her hiking boots.

Normally, I'd love this sort of activity, but Violet's body is what I want to explore. I drop my phone in my pocket just as

we get to a part of the garden that's open for public use.

“So, you crashed my club, but I haven't seen you garden, sir.”

Violet turns to me, smirking from the challenge she just issued. She must have forgotten that I've been all over the globe doing random things.

“Oh, baby, if you wanted me to use my hands and get dirty, I can think of many ways I could do that.” I lean in just a little. “All of them would be pleasurable for you.”

Violet flushes a little but leans in closer. I'm not sure if she's aware that she's giving signs that she wants me to kiss her.

My dick stirs in my pants. If I kiss her now, I'm not sure I'll stop.

“Lead the way.”

An older lady gives us a rundown on the garden rules. Since the first frost doesn't happen until December, we have a good variety of planting options.

Violet's preciseness amuses me. It's like I'm reading her checklist.

Seeds? Check.

Gloves? Check.

Gardening tools? Check.

I bet she used to measure the holes and spacing for exact dimensions. She's so cute.

“Are you going to watch me do all the work?”

“Maybe. It's cute how formulaic you are with the process.”

“Formulaic? I'm doing it how it's supposed to be done.”

I'm amused that this is an activity she chose for our date. From what we've done so far, I see that she likes casual encounters, which is the opposite of what I expected from a by-the-book lawyer.

“True, but it’s gardening. Those are guidelines. It’s okay to get messy and not be perfect.” I drop to my knees in front of the soil waiting for me. “Come here.”

She squints her eyes at me as she considers joining me. I pat the space between my legs. Quickly, I find that I didn’t think that through. Violet’s warm body feels good in my arms. The very ass that I’ve been watching all morning presses against my inner thighs, dropping my patience tremendously.

Wrapping my arm around her waist, I tuck her in closer to my body.

“Don’t be shy.”

A shiver runs through her body and moves through me like it’s electricity. Briefly, I calculate how much it’d cost me to fuck her right here. I’m thinking strictly about finances. How much do I need to pay for us to be alone?

Her soft scent calls me to do bad things like pluck her before she’s ready. *Damn, now she has me saying pluck.*

Violet squirms a little, rubbing me in ways that’d get her in trouble. I dig my hand into her side to stop further movement. Her breath hitches when I grip her ponytail and pull her head back and run my lips along her jaw without kissing her. I inhale her when I get to her neck.

“We’ve been outside most of the day, yet you still smell so damn sweet.” I work my way back to her ear. “Edible”

“Um,” she whimpers. “This is not why you called me over here.”

I smile with my lips near her temple. “No, you’re just damn distracting.” Shifting, I pick up some of the seeds next to me. “Cabbage is in the Cole family. Cole is a type of crop.”

She cuts me off. “That one I know.”

“Okay, then you can see that, since it’s my other little brother’s name, that my mother gave us all plant names, but she didn’t use the so-called obvious ones. Cole is Latin for stem. My mom wanted a nature theme to match Heywood.”

My siblings and I don't speak as much as we should, but they know I'll drop everything to help them. Ambrose and I are the closest in age and contact. Cole is a couple of years younger than Ambrose, and Dahlia, the baby, is still in her twenties. I make a mental note to check in with them once I have Santa Barbara settled.

"And that's why your sister is named Dahlia," Violet concludes.

"Exactly. Now, back to this. You don't really need tools or gloves for cabbage seeds. Just use the tip of your finger." I demonstrate by dipping my finger in the soil and rotating my finger like I want to do on her clit. "It doesn't need to be deep to get the job done. Then you cover it by patting it lightly and making it tight." I pick up the can to water the spot. "Hydration is necessary. This is why it's good to do this bare. You can feel exactly how wet everything is."

You're evil," she whispers this, sucking her teeth.

Another laugh escapes as she wiggles out of my space.

"I'm merely participating. You picked this activity. I thought you wanted to see me garden."

Violet is standing now. She folds her arms and glares at me a little.

"Well, that activity is over. We can move on to the next."

Her cheeks and neck are slightly red from my planting lesson. I love getting under her skin. It's too much fun bothering her, but I'm going to behave. It hasn't skipped my notice that she planned things that are supposed to be light and friendly activities."

I can do that. I'm not ruled by sex, but I do want her to beg for it. My attraction to her makes me act up, but I'll play the rest of today her way. Violet needs the entire package.

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CHAPTER 17

VIOLET

“TASTE MY TACO.”

I stare at Timothy for a second because that sentence can mean anything from him. He gives me a sexy smirk and waves his spicy shrimp taco before he leans in and puts it in front of my mouth.

He did the same with his ice cream earlier, so I shouldn't be surprised at this point. I scooch closer on the small bench and take a bite; my eyes grow from the delicious flavor of the seasoned shrimp and the spicy sauce. I'm glad I came to the taco place I've been meaning to try.

“Delicious,” I admit.

Mimicking him, I pluck a piece of steak off my taco and press it against his lips. Timothy's perfect teeth separate to accept my offering. He pulls it in with his tongue, and his lips partially kiss the tip of my thumb. Now, we have four kids.

“That is so good, Violet.” He nods as he swallows. “This was a great pick,” he proclaims just before he polishes off the rest of his taco while I finish mine. We shared a Vietnamese fusion taco prior to moving on to our picks.

Timothy rises as he wipes his hands, then reaches out a hand for me. “What's next, madame?”

We had a late lunch. I check my watch and it's almost 4PM. I thought he'd be ready to go home by now. I'd only planned hiking, the garden tour, and food. The ice cream was a spontaneous stop.

“I thought you’d have something else to do tonight.”

He shakes his head. “I told you, I’m all yours.” It’s a sincere statement and not one meant for seduction, but my heart still flutters like I’m a sheltered virgin. “What do you usually do on a Saturday night?”

“Watch made-for-television movies and bitch about the decisions of the characters.”

Timothy holds out his arm.

“Let’s go.” I tuck my hand in the crook of his arm, allowing him to lead me to his SUV. “So, is this a pajama type of situation?”

I chuckle. “For sure.”

Once we’re buckled and he’s on the highway, Timothy circles back to a question I forgot he asked.

“Why did you choose contract law?”

“Well, in law school, you spend all that time learning about different cases and arguing about the validity of such. I knew early on that I didn’t want to do anything that would have me questioning who I was as a person. I knew I could be a ‘good guy’ in family law, but didn’t want to hear the heartbreaking stories that would make me question mankind. Criminal was definitely out for that same reason. Some of the other laws like corporate may have loopholes or ways to work around it but it’s a little more black and white. Is or isn’t. Yeah, you can still screw people over for greed, but I don’t deal with cases like that daily. I mostly look at contracts and the legalese of things that come across my desk. It usually ensures that I have a steady schedule most days.”

“Is it boring?”

“Sometimes.” My nod is a vertical dramatic tip of my head. “One time, I didn’t realize I was asleep until my office phone rang.”

Timothy’s laughter makes his dimple pop under his beard. Just that fast, I’m lost in how attractive he is to me. It feels like I’ll never get used to how good he looks. It’s unnerving. I

can't keep turning into a teenager in his presence, but am unsure if having sex with him will cure me or make it worse. My brain is back to its latest debate; sleep with him or not. I wonder if he'll deliver on his potential. No man has ever made me horny to the point of wanting to beg like Timothy inspires me to do. My mind conjures up fantasies of him touching my naked body while whispering some of the dirty things he said to me.

“Violet!”

I shake my head and focus on him again. “Sorry, zoned out.”

His smile suggests he knows exactly where my mind went. “It happens. I said I'm going to drop you off. I should be back no longer than two hours. I need to make a phone call and change for movie night.”

“Okay.” I look around and realize we're in front of my complex. I open the door but look at him before I get out. “If you get tired, you don't have to come back.”

Timothy's expression doesn't change as he looks at me with serious blue eyes. “I will be back and I'll bring dinner.”

The world moves in slow motion when he leans in and pecks the corner of my mouth. It's such brief contact, but I want to pull him in and never let him go.

“Thank you.” I scream on the inside as I get out.

Thank you? Why would I say that?

I hang my head when I get on the elevator. I need to do better around Timothy. I'm a highly educated lawyer, and an independent black woman. My heart shouldn't try to beat out of my chest over a peck that wasn't really on my lips.

I want him to kiss me. Ever since he crashed my meeting, my mind has been all things *Timothy*. He's made it worse. Even today, the way he grabbed me in the garden almost made me lose all my common sense. My mama would have cussed me out after finding out I had my ass out in public in front of an elder. I'd never hear the end of it, yet he made me want to take that risk.

Once inside, I strip for my shower while I try to figure out where Leilani has gone. My call went to voicemail again. She wouldn't have gone back to Ambrose without telling me, since that's been my advice. To clarify, I've been urging her to talk to me. I'd never try to convince her to get back into a relationship that's harmful to her. I highly doubt he abused her in any capacity. She would have told me by now and there would be evidence of it in her behavior. The few times she has spoken about him, there wasn't an ounce of fear or disgust in her tone.

But, what is it?

I'm a firm believer that your bestie should not know every detail of your marriage, but I'd like to know the broad issue so I can help. The warm water massages some of the stress away until I realize exactly what I agreed to do tonight. Timothy is coming over in pajamas to watch movies. That teenage feeling is back.

He makes me giddy.

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CHAPTER 18

TIMOTHY

“DO YOU HAVE ANY MOVIES IN MIND?”

I got to Violet’s house two hours and fifteen minutes after I dropped her off. My shower was normal, but I had to take a few phone calls to finalize my launch. I didn’t get a chance to check in with any of my siblings, but I will soon.

She chews on her sushi while she pulls up her DVR. I’ve never seen so many movies with some variation of love in the title.

Violet looks adorable in soft purple pajamas. They are the kind of pants that are fitted to her body like a glove and the t-shirt has a sleeping white kitten on it. The sudden urge to pull her close doesn’t surprise me anymore. I’ve been finding reasons to touch her all day.

“This one is new.” I drop a piece of food in my mouth as she explains. “This one is about two people who clashed over a misunderstanding. She thought he hated her, but he is her secret admirer.”

I shrug. Doesn’t sound like anything I’d line up to watch, but I’ve understood and accepted a long time ago that women love this stuff, even if they know exactly what’s going to happen.

“Sounds good.”

“Why don’t I believe you?”

“It’s true. It’s fine.”

“But...” she prompts.

I put down my chopsticks and turn more to the side so I can look at her. “These movies sometimes...they just make it seem like you have to choose love over everything. Why can’t you have the promotion and the new love? Plus, it’s a new relationship. So you fall into instant love and are supposed to rearrange your life just to make it make sense?”

“I think they’re trying to show that this one special person helped the other person realize what’s important.”

“Like leaving a successful career in hopes that the small business they barely saved will prosper next year because they kissed at the end?”

I’m not trying to shit on the movies she likes to watch, but some of the themes annoy the shit out of me. I’m in the middle of swallowing my next piece of sushi when I realize that she’s laughing. It’s good I didn’t offend her.

“Why do you think I yell at the television?”

“Good. Like if you and I were one of these movies, It would have gone one of two ways. We would have fallen madly in love at the wedding. Wait. You’d be up for partner.”

Violet holds up a hand. “Wait, first one or both of us would have lost a parent already.”

I nod. “Yeah, to something tragic like cancer. Then one of us would have to be worried about our family business...”

“That’d be you, since you have one.”

I laugh. “Yeah, so I’d be gone for years, doing everything but the family business. My remaining parent and Ambrose would be hiding the failure from me.”

“Or hiding that they’re getting ready to sell it, but didn’t want to upset you with the news.”

I play off what she’s saying. “Right, because I never contributed, but somehow give a big damn about it closing.”

“You’ll happen to be questioning life,” she adds.

“Yeah, not sure if I like what I’ve been doing for years and happen to be exceptional at doing it.”

“Then that’d make me the smalltown lawyer, who you assumed had no ambition, but you later find I left a high-powered job for peace.”

“We’d fall in love that weekend during ridiculous wedding activities.”

“And you’ll have the solutions necessary for us to take over my family business and thrive,” I continue, loving how she’s lit up with amusement.

“I’d yell at you because I thought you were going back to the big city job and storm off without letting you explain”

“It’s a new job with a much much higher pay. And my interview is the same day and time as something major for you where I’d profusely promised I’d be there.”

“You’d leave that interview just to rush inside and profess your devotion to me in a room full of people.”

“And then we kiss,” I conclude

Violet’s smile is distracted as she stares at my lips. She’s had her moments and I’ve had mine, but this one isn’t ours.

“What do you miss the most about being in a relationship?”

The heat in her gaze responds, but I know her lips won’t repeat it.

“The relaxed times of just hanging out and being in our own little bubble. This...” She points between herself, the food, and the television. “I usually do this alone. And sometimes I think it’d be nice to cuddle.”

I appreciate her honesty. People are so quick to act like they don’t need companionship that something like that is hardly admitted.

“I know what you mean,” I admit.

I start clearing the empty items and dropping trash back in the bag I used to bring them inside Violet’s place and stacking the recyclables.

“Where can I throw this away?”

“You’ve already put the trash in the bag. I can take it from here.”

I stop her from standing and look her in the eyes. “Where do you want me to put this?”

“The recycle and trash bins are next to each other in the kitchen.”

I nod. “Thank you.”

When I get back, she has the movie started but paused and is holding a little glass of the flavored Saki she had in the fridge.

“Here you go,” she says and picks up the other when I accept it. “Cheers.”

We clink our glasses together and drink them like shots. With my empty glass on the table, I lean back until the back of her sofa and the arm cradles my body, and pat the space near me.

“What?” she inquires like her brain can’t process her offer.

“Come cuddle with me, Violet.”

Her logic fights with her desire, but her desire wins. Violet’s shoulders hunch in a cute little shrug and she grabs her blanket, then cuddles up next to me. Her body warms my side, and her head settles on my chest. I’d forgotten what contentment felt like until now.

I officially don’t give a fuck about what we watch.

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CHAPTER 19

VIOLET

FROM: TIMOTHY@PLUCKINGLADIESGARDENCLUB.COM

To: Plucking Ladies Group

Good morning Ladies,

As you know, I'm hosting this week's meeting. It will be at my house. The address and the code to the gate is on the sign-up sheet. If you don't mind, I'd like to propose that we move it to Friday, as I have a spa, sauna, a pool, and a tennis court at your disposal. Feel free to bring anything you need to enjoy the amenities. I apologize for the short notice, but please add any allergies or dietary restrictions you may have to the attached form by 4PM today so I can finalize the food order with the caterer.

See you soon,

Tim

Geesh, I keep forgetting how rich that man is, especially after spending the entire weekend with him. Waking up in his arms sealed any relationship fantasy I would have avoided.

Timothy gave me a glimpse of the kind of relationship I could get behind without giving me not one kiss. The reminder that I have to go to his house, which I've never seen, and pretend that gardening is the only thing on my mind is crazy.

In fact, Timothy has stolen my attention all together. I overslept because it felt so good to be wrapped up in his warmth and having his chest rising and falling in steady breaths as he slept. Every time my eyes would open, my comfort would lull me back to sleep.

Eventually, it resulted in me just texting Ron and telling him I'm sick. I am sick, but not the kind that allows me to call out. Being sick of being single is one-hundred-percent a personal problem.

Timothy didn't let me go when he awakened. Instead, he pulled me closer and kissed my temple. It was perfect to just lie there in his arms and be in the moment, even if we were on the couch.

Life caught up with us, and we parted ways. I still lie in the same spot, looking for energy to do the million things I'd normally do on a Monday, but finding none. It's definitely an off day.

After ordering some breakfast, I stretched out on my couch and turned on the movie I'd fallen asleep on last night. A smile tugs at my lips when she was offered a promotion and started to worry about what the guy she was falling for would think about her needing to go to Italy.

I hug the pillow that still smells like him and don't move until my breakfast arrives.

It's crazy. Timothy has made it hard to remember what my life was like before he moved here.

I'm in trouble.

Driving up to Timothy's house for the first time is an experience. From the road, there's only a sign embossed with his address. The road winds between rows of plush, mature trees until everything opens up to display a sprawling mansion surrounded by an immaculate landscape.

I park and make my way to the massive door. After ringing the doorbell, I adjust my purple dress since it's by far the tightest I own. I couldn't help but get all dolled up for this meeting. We hadn't spoken since he left my home—both of us busy with our livelihoods and general life—and I miss him. I can't act like I don't. I'm beyond pretending he doesn't affect me when both of us know that he does.

I'm thirty minutes early and don't care. I'd like to see him alone first if possible. I half expected a butler or something to answer the door, but Timothy swings it open with an inviting smile on his face.

He opens his mouth to greet me, but his eyes travel down my body. I'm usually dressed up for the meetings, but I took it up a notch and left my braids to hang down to my waist. My dress is stocking free and the push-up bra makes my almost C cups look plentiful.

Timothy's look is just as polished as it was when he crashed my meeting. His hair is combed back out of his face. The top three buttons of his light purple linen shirt are open, giving me a glimpse of the chest I had the pleasure of painting and sleeping on this past weekend.

"I brought snacks," I blurt out. "I know you said you would cater—"

My words leave me when he pulls me inside but presses me against the now closed door. I drop the bag and wrap my arms around his neck. I don't want to overthink right now. My nipples tighten and heat pools in my lower belly when he closes the space between us.

"Please tell me the snacks you're referring to are only for me and had my name on them last weekend."

"Well, I'm not going to turn you down if you're hungry."

I have no idea where that came from, but I'm sticking by what I said.

Timothy makes a sound somewhat like a growl low in his throat. It tears through me, exciting everything it passes. I've

accepted defeat. I need to take the Timmy train. Speaking the nickname in my head.

“Timmy.”

At the sound of the forbidden nickname, he smiles at me as if accepting a challenge. His smirk is almost evil before he crashes his lips on mine. My body screams, “Finally!” I accept his tongue, happily sucking it into my mouth. Tasting the man that drives me crazy is one of the best decisions of my life. His talented mouth motivates me to keep him all to myself. Fuck the meeting.

His strong hands take a firm squeeze of my ass, prompting me to try to climb his body.

Timothy breaks the kiss but drops pecks along my neck. “Fuck, Vi. We don’t have time for me to do everything I want.”

“I have an overnight bag.”

“Fuck, you’re speaking my language. I need a fucking sample right now.”

He drops to his knees as he pushes my dress further up my hips. Timmy nips my lower lips through my panties, and I refuse to stop him.

“You smell so fucking good when you’re hot for me.”

Hooking the seam of my panties with his finger, he pulls them tight in the center until it’s not covering anything but my clit. He sucks one of my lips into his mouth while teasing me with his knuckle.

I moan as I watch the most beautiful man I’ve ever seen taste me like I’m his biggest craving.

“Violet,” he whispers, his eyes hooded with desire, finding mine again. “The moment our company leaves, you’ll be mine.”

His knuckle teases my clit while he tastes the other lip. I want to grab his hair, but people will be here soon, and I don’t want to mess with his look. My hand grips the doorknob as I rest my other hand on his shoulder. The pleasurable feelings

he's creating swirl together, tightening deep inside of me until it explodes.

My breath comes out in erratic huffs as the waves rock my body. Timothy hasn't done much and I'm already coming for him. Excitement gives me another wave of my orgasm as I try to imagine what he'll do to me later.

Removing his finger, he sucks his knuckle into his mouth. He groans like he's tasting the best thing that has ever encountered his tongue. He fixes my underwear so I'm covered again, then places a sucking kiss through them on my clit.

He's on his feet again, pulling me into a kiss that makes me light-headed with lust. His erection pokes my belly like it's promising to meet me soon. I'm sad when pulls away, but his words are full of promise as he cups my pussy.

“Keep them on. I want you to feel a reminder of what's coming every time you move.”

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CHAPTER 20

TIMOTHY

I'D PLANNED THE MEETING DOWN TO THE LAST DETAIL, MAKING sure I had everything ready to be the best host for the ladies. An array of food and alcohol, along with a rare flower expert to lead the discussion. I had samples of the lavender lemonade and other botanical products that I'll be launching soon to be available in grocery stores nationwide.

Now, none of it matters. All it took was for Violet to show up with her mood set to sex for everything else to float away. The event that I once thought would be fun is now the obstacle keeping me from burying myself deep in Violet's pussy.

For the last hour or so, we've orbited away from each other, staying on opposite sides of the room and having different conversations. If I get too close, the party is over. Fuck it, they can stay as long as they want as long as they don't disturb what I plan to do to Violet.

I'm wired like a starving wild animal waiting to feast. Our eyes meet, not for the first time, and that current is still there from what we started before this.

All the ladies look distracted. Lily and Ivy are talking to my special guest. Mayeth and Pansy are discussing pastries. And Hyacinth is dazzling Tulip with one of her fascinating tales. All of the ladies come from different worlds, but converge for the same purpose. I just can't care about that right now.

I tilt my head, silently telling Violet to follow me. I'm not an attentive host, but I'll make it up to them the next time I

host. They're grown women, but even if they burnt the house down, I'd just buy another.

I make it to the back hallway undetected and move closer to the shadows where I want to be. The sexy as fuck heels Violet is wearing click on the ground as she approaches. Her head swivels, looking for me, but she doesn't have to seek me long. Grabbing her, I pull her into the butler's pantry.

She gasps, but my mouth covers any sound she was going to make. It's dark in this part of the house because I didn't need the pantry for this party so neither should my guest. Thinking back to our erotic paint session, I've been itching to have some semi-public sexy with Violet.

"Let's see if you can keep it down."

"You're the host and I'm the president. We should be out there."

"After this, I'm not waiting any longer." I tear off her underwear this time.

Her whimper is excited. "Right here, Timmy?"

"Right, fucking here." I knead her naked ass cheeks hard, the grip keeping her body flush with mine. "Would it make you come if someone catches us?"

She looks over to the open door. It's dark and I can only make out bits and pieces so I can't see her expression. Violet presses into my hand when I palm her breasts and lick along her collarbone.

"Let's find out," she volleys, before pulling me into another hungry kiss. That little show of aggression was hot, but she'll pay for it later.

I hold her to me with one hand while the other works to open my khakis. I'm surprised that I'm so wound up that my hand trembles with anticipation. The khakis fall to my ankles, but my boxers stop mid-thigh, and that's fucking good enough. Violet's sweet heat teases me, but that's not what gets me.

"Please hurry. Fuck me, Timmy."

I'm proud of her word choices, but hearing her beg a little is a fucking symphony for me.

My dick is so hard it hurts, but we're on the verge of relief. Violet's leg is now secure in the crook of my arm, completely opening her for business. My lips are near hers, but we're not kissing when I slide my cock into her slick walls. I taste her pants as we both work to not reveal our location. Closing the distance, our mouths lock together while I pull out slowly then slam all the way inside of her. We feed each other our moans because it feels so fucking good.

If I were to be dramatic, I'd say we were building up to this moment for five fucking years.

"Fuck, Vi. I have so much planned." I rock my hips and grind into her in a way that steals our breaths.

Her nails dig into my arms as she holds on, which only excites me more. She has no idea how I plan to spread her out on my bed and suck her pussy until she begs me to stop or pass out. Her inner muscles squeeze my dick like they know it's home. We're not leaving my place the entire weekend.

I keep my strokes steady yet hard, careful to not make our skin clap too much. It's damn difficult to stay quiet because she feels so damn good, but the semi-public angle has both of us climbing towards the edge fast.

"Tim, I," she hiccups out before she moans low and hard.

That's it. My thumb finds its new friend and Violet almost bolts in the air.

"Don't run from this appetizer, baby."

I continue to circle her clit with my thumb; her head falls back just as her pussy locks me in for life. Oh, the pleasure of feeling her come on my dick is worth this entire move to Santa Barbara. My dick spurts, filling her with all the gratitude for inviting us to her housewarming.

I kiss her leisurely, making out as I start to slip out of her. My cock feels lonely, but we must separate to get back to the party.

“I hope you enjoyed your preview. Stick around for the main attraction.”

Violet’s voice is still husky with lust, but my sentence brings the giggle I was looking for out of her. It makes me admit to myself that my feelings, like plants, have taken root and are growing strong.

There just may be something to those whirlwind romances.

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CHAPTER 21

VIOLET

I'VE BEEN SUCKED INTO THE VORTEX WITH NO POSSIBILITY OF escape. Timothy is magical. I've had sex for an hour before with one guy who had all stamina but no skills. I was tired and ready to go. Eventually, I had to get myself there. That was not an issue with Timmy. That man may as well be my pussy whisperer because he's gotten me there twice without any Olympics.

His command on my body in those brief encounters ensured I'd give it up again. My legs still trembled slightly from the quickie when I returned to the party, but I felt no shame. Some of the ladies gave me knowing smirks as I passed. I've heard some of their stories and seen some of their proposals, so I know most of them would have done the same.

As a lawyer, I've spent ample time always making sure I move at the height of professionalism. I even brought some of that to the club, being the president first and a member second. I don't have to always be *on*, especially not with my friends. I didn't care that they knew. Hell, they probably knew I'd give in to Timothy before I did. I don't pretend to try to leave even when the last set of people offered their goodbyes. In fact, I chatted with them on the way to the door and locked it behind them.

I said a small prayer for myself once we were alone. If he was able to shatter my world in a few minutes, what is he going to do now that he has all night. I take a deep breath and look at myself in the foggy mirror. We'd parted ways to shower—at my request. He came inside of me—something I've

never experienced first-hand—and it felt divine, but does leave a mess. I cleaned up as much as I could before returning to the party, but wanted to finish the job before we'd gone any further.

My nerves make my heart skip a beat. It's go time. Timidly, I peek outside since he insisted that I use the master bathroom. With no sight of him, I tiptoe out, not sure where I'd go in just a towel. It's quite funny since I signed up for this. I wanted a weekend fuckfest until one amazing quickie has me wondering if I'm about that life.

“Violet.” I jump at the sound of my name rumbling out in Timothy's deep voice.

“Hmm?” I respond, trying to look innocent. I fix my sight on his crown molding.

“You're not considering escaping, are you?” The humor in his voice makes me crack a smile.

“No, just looking around.”

I giggle because it sounds like a lie to me as well. I wouldn't really run out, but...old habits.

All my amusement drops when I turn to face him. Seeing a picture is one thing, but having Timothy standing in front of me fully naked and equally hard makes me swallow slowly.

The heat in his eyes belies the humor that was just in his tone. His hand grips his magnificent dick. I've touched it through his shorts and have felt it inside of me, but this is the first time I've seen it. I'm not close enough but I feel stuck in place.

“Do you drive a lot, Vi?”

“Yes,” I answer, confused by the question.

“When you let too much space get between you and the car in front of you, what happens?”

My brain is slow to formulate and answer because I can't take my eyes away from Timothy's thumb slowly circling the head of his dick.

“Someone jumps in the lane between me and the other car.”

He nods a little and his chest flexes a little when he starts full strokes from the base to the tip.

“And do you want someone to jump in your lane between us?”

I frown because his question is problematic. The thought of someone else being in this house, seeing him like he is now, and being looked at the way he’s looking at me is beyond unacceptable since I’ve already named five kids, minimum. Escaping doesn’t sound appealing any more.

“Hell, no.”

His smile brings out his dimple. “Then you should?”

“Move in?”

Timothy’s laughter echoes in the room. He’s amused that he did exactly what he planned to do, arouse my competitive nature.

“If that’s what you want to do.”

Nah, he’d have to ask me. “I could say the same, you know,” I grumble as I move forward. “I turn down advances daily.”

“I don’t doubt that, but I’m not the one wearing sneakers. I’ve already told you I’m looking for a wife. You constantly have one foot out the door. Why?”

It’s not a question I want to answer because I’m not sure I should answer it yet. I pinch the towel between my thumb and forefinger and pull it away from my body. Opening my fingers, I allow it to fall to the floor while maintaining eye contact with Timothy.

“Then you’re still too far away,” I say, instead of following his conversation path.

He smirks at my antics as he takes in my nudity. His pink tongue moistens his lips and reminds me how he teased me with his mouth.

“First, something needs to be addressed.” His voice is gruff and makes me fear that I failed to change the subject. “I made you a promise,” he continues. “I told you there were consequences to calling me Timmy.”

The timbre coming off his sentence has my nipples harder than they already were. My arousal makes me squirm a little. Some of the authority he wielded when we first collided is prominent again.

“But, you’ve already been in my pussy, *Timmy*.”

I don’t know why I felt the need to press his buttons, but I’d gone from considering escaping to wanting all the smoke. Timothy muddles my brain and makes my thinking chaotic.

He moves a chair to the middle of the room without directly responding to me pressing his buttons. His smile looks downright sinister before he speaks again.

“Have a seat.” His demeanor is casual, but his voice is all heat.

For some reason, I follow the instruction. It could be that my brain has escaped my head again, or that my aroused body wants him to back up his threat. I sit and watch him walk to me, all attitude and sex, then concede that it’s both. His tall, tight body casts a shadow over me as he stands in front of me. Just when I was feeling like this would get very Magic Mike, he moves in closer until he’s standing with my legs between his.

Timothy moves his hand from his dick and it bobs and stops just before touching my lips. My mouth waters when my brain receives the message.

“Open up, Vi,” he coaxes me, rocking his hips just enough for the tip of his dick to kiss me.

I look him in the eyes as I lick the dab of precum off my bottom lip. He’s still close enough that my lips and tongue brush his head during the simple task. He has no idea how amazing he looks fully turned on and raring to go.

Timothy grips his dick again and traces my lips like it’s lipstick. I’ve never paid attention to the sensation of

something rubbing my lips, and it's amazing. Giving in to my curiosity, I lick his beautiful erection slowly in a circular motion around his hole to see if I have a fraction of the hold on him as he has on me.

The reverence in which he says my name with his beautiful eyes closed does it for me. He's so breathtaking it hurts, yet when he looks at me again, the need in his eyes mirrors what I feel inside when I'm around him. It's thrilling and the push I need to stop teasing. I open my mouth for him and guide him to where he wants to be. My mouth hasn't participated in such activities in a while, and it takes me a moment to relax my jaw enough to slide him in further.

I stroke and suck him while he creates the most erotic sounds I've ever heard. I want to make a soundtrack of it and fuck him to it. Timothy is absorbing me into him until there will be no me without him.

"Good, baby. Fuck, just like that." I'm dripping on his chair and trying to remember if I've ever been so aroused.

My body is lava that can only be extinguished by Timothy. His hand grips the braids at the back of my head, and he rocks forward just a little deeper every time, until I give him complete control to fuck my mouth. My fingers dig into his thighs, encouraging him to keep going.

Tim's abs contract with each roll of his hips; he's a fucking sight to behold. My desire is to please him. We're both heaving when he pulls out, my spit shining on his dick, and I just want it to disappear inside of me. I need more than the preview I was treated to earlier.

Timothy grabs the back of my head again, but instead of feeding me his dick, he bends down and feeds me his tongue. Our kiss is wild and messy while he thwarts my effort to climb him. Getting on his knees fast, he pushes my legs apart. He damn near growls at the evidence of my excitement coating my inner thighs. Roughly, he pulls me to the edge and sucks my inner thigh, licking up my wetness. I lay my head back on the chair, but roll it to the side so I can watch him reprogram my body to only want him.

His tawny head moves from one side to the other, cleaning me with his tongue like I'm a nectar essential to keeping him alive. I'm already moaning with my legs trembling before he even makes it to my center.

The first lick has me crying out because I'm so fucking sensitive. Tim's beard tickles my thighs as he sucks what feels like all of me into his mouth. I don't have the words for the best way to describe how he devours my pussy. It feels like his mouth and tongue are everywhere at the same time. His fingers only serve to hold me open as an offering to his mouth. If I'm nothing else, I'm helpful, so I open my legs as wide as I can to give him passage. Just as warning shudders flit through my body, he stops and moves back.

“Turn around and get on your knees.”

I'm beyond the point of questioning his directives. “Up here.”

He nods while he licks my juices from his lips. “Now.”

It's not long before I'm facing the other way on the chair with my ass in the air as instructed like a prized pupil.

“Such a wonderful ass, Vi,”

He spreads my cheeks apart, gaining access to the buffet where he just feasted.

“Fuck,” I cry out when his tongue enters my pussy strong and hard, impaling me in one of the best ways possible.

He teases my walls in a long, pulsing rhythm that has me squirming and crying out. I grip the back of the chair, not caring if I ruin the fabric as my body bucks and waves from his oral assault. I break apart, coming hard from his tongue, but he shoves his fingers inside to prolong my departure from earth. He's not done because he's still licking and sucking me, but his head is moving north. My eyes buck open when his tongue starts teasing my puckered hole while he fucks me with his fingers.

It's never happened to me before and I want to hate it, but my goodness, the different sensations are having a heady effect on my body. His mouth and fingers work me, not

knowing that the force of his actions make my sensitive nipples rub the chair in ways I cannot be mad at right now. Sensation overload. Eventually, I find myself riding his tongue in my ass and his fingers in my pussy until I'm cresting again, crying out for anyone to come get this man.

It is the wrong time to speak to any deity, but *somebody* has to pray for me. This orgasm is bigger than the last, making me fear that I'd pass out from the exertion. By the grace of everyone, I make it through, only for me to realize that Tim is standing. His big hands dig into my hips and, oh goodness, his dick starts to stretch me, pushing his way into my highly confused pussy.

It feels so fucking good, but I'm sure he's going to kill me. One of his hands squeezes the nape of my neck hard enough to make my walls clench on his dick, earning me another deep groan from him.

"Don't get tired now, Vi. Our weekend is just starting."

Oh, my. I need more prayers.

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CHAPTER 22

TIMOTHY

FUCK, I CAN'T GET ENOUGH OF VIOLET. I'M STARTING TO think my threat to break her pussy was literal. My stomach growls like I'd expect since we spent the entire night fucking, but the ache in my dick is greater. I would blame it on ending a year hiatus, but I know it's Violet and my new addiction to her pussy.

Her side of the bed, however, is empty. I don't blame her, but it's unacceptable. I step into the bathroom and do all my morning showering and grooming without bothering to put on clothes before I walk through my home to find her. She's here; I know without a doubt that she wouldn't sneak out while I was asleep.

The sun bounces off the ocean, and I find her on the back patio. A mug of tea sits on the outside table, and she stares out past the beach, holding the phone to her ear. I don't have to see her face to know she's worried. The tension is all through her shoulders and posture.

"Lei? This isn't funny. Call me back."

Ah, Ambrose is dedicated to showing Violet how it feels to be left in the dark. Six months without contact is a long time, but he knew she was alive and safe. The difference here is Violet doesn't have the resources to know that and is more likely to call the cops.

"Ambrose found her."

She jumps, startled that I was behind her, but then her eyes grow with panic. "He found her? Now, she's not answering. I

have to help her! And you *knew*?”

I catch her arm to stop her from running past me. “Help her with what? He’s her fucking husband.”

“What if he hurt her or...”

I feel my temper rising, but I work to keep it under control. Surely Violet doesn’t understand how she sounds.

“Are you insinuating that my brother is abusive? Did she tell you anything like that?”

Violet blinks a few times as she looks up at me. “Well...I don’t know! I didn’t get that vibe, but there are hours of television shows full of family and friends who swore their loved one would never hurt anyone.”

“Do you really think I’d come find her to take her back to an abusive situation? My brother isn’t abusive.”

She jerks out of my hold. “How would you know? You’re never home.”

It’s true, but it feels like more of a dig than her just stating a fact. “You didn’t answer my first question. Do you think I’d condone such behavior?”

Violet’s eyes are big and sad as she stares out at the water. “I would like to think not. All I know is she came to me six months ago and asked me to buy her some time to think. She never told me why. Prominent families have been known to close ranks on crazy things. Now, she can’t even use her phone...”

I don’t agree with the radio silence, but my brother’s point still stands. He had no communication for six months.

“For six months, you helped your friend avoid my brother. If we were married, and Ambrose helped me do the same, would you care about Ambrose’s concern for me if you were him?” She opens her mouth and closes it while she formulates an answer. “I can tell you that I know for sure that if Leilani helped you do something like this and lied to me for six months, she could kiss my whole ass.”

Violet frowns and crosses her arm. I don't care that she's mad; the way my shirt hangs on her body has my dick hardening.

"My loyalty is to Leilani; she asked me to cover for her."

"And my loyalty is to Ambrose; he missed his wife."

"So you did this?" I don't miss the accusation in her words.

I shake my head. "No, but I knew the moment he found her. On his own."

"How do I know you didn't go through my phone or home with all the time we spent together?"

"Can you really see me sneaking to do anything?" I fold my arms and stare at her until she answers.

"Within days of your arrival, she disappears. I've been distracted with dates."

"You should know better or trust me by now." Violet scoffs and tries to walk off, but I catch her again. "Try that shit again, Violet."

"And what?"

I raise an eyebrow because I love to be challenged. She inhales when I close the space between us, caging her in between me and the couch. If she moves back, she'll just fall over the back of it. She gasps when I grab the back of her neck and force her to look at me.

"You sound like one of those movie girls you complain about. You're not some innocent bystander. You have fault in this mess. You two act like you were born with wings, always trying to fly off rather than deal with what's in front of you. What in the hell kind of jumpy lawyers are y'all? I don't like that shit. You stay and fucking deal."

My annoyance with her hasn't dampened my desire to have her. I nip her bottom lip, then kiss down from her chin to her throat. I hate that I'm sexually distracted when I have a point to make. She whimpers under my hold, and she grips my biceps to stay upright.

“Don’t ever try to run off, Violet. I don’t have my brother’s patience to plot.” I push her legs apart to make room for me as her ass lands on the back of the couch. “I’ll fuck up the world to find you.” Her breath catches when my fingers run along her slit. I groan with appreciation for the lack of underwear. “And when I do, I’ll fucking destroy whatever life you tried to build without me.” She grunts when I slide inside of her, then move my hand from her nape to her throat. “I’ll be sure to tear up your pussy until your legs refuse to work.” I drop my forehead to hers as I deliver punishing thrusts to make my point. “If you want to be free of me, you better fucking tell me like a woman.”

“Tim...” Violet whispers, but doesn’t finish her thought.

My thumb presses against her lips to silence her. Anything she has to say can wait. I’d rather be inside of her than argue about my brother’s marriage. Both of them are adults and know what kind of commitment they signed up to enter.

I pour all my anger, frustration, and desire into branding her pussy with my cock. She may as well wear a ring because that’s how stuck she is with me. That should be her concern.

Violet cries out and throws her head back when I hook an arm under her leg to open her more. Her other leg goes where it should have been this entire time-around my waist. She releases a pleasure induced grunt when I grind into her. Her walls quiver and suck me in deeper, squeezing me tighter.

Fuck, it’s so good. I hold my praise in because I am pissed at her for her accusations about me.

“You need to be all the way in or get the fuck out of the way.”

To prove my point, I deliver more thrusts, moving only for my pleasure. I pull out once I’m close and come in my hand.

Violet’s eyebrows furrow with confusion when I step back. She didn’t get to come and that’s something I’ve delivered every time we’ve had sex.

“Hey, where are you going?” she asks when I turn and go back inside.

“To eat,” I casually respond like I don’t know why she’s asking.

She slides to her feet, still looking like she’s trying to solve a complicated puzzle. That’s the thing, it’s not complicated.

“What you’re feeling right now is how it feels to deal with someone who’s not fully committed.”

Her irritation spikes as she follows me into the kitchen to argue with me while I wash my hands.

“Commitment? How did you jump all the way there?”

“I didn’t jump. I’ve been saying the same shit the entire time!” We stare at each other like we keep doing in every face off we’ve had. “I told you. I was serious about finding a wife. If you cannot see yourself having a committed relationship with me, then what are we doing?”

“You were looking for Leilani when you got here.”

I smack my hand on the counter. Looking for her brought me here, but I stayed for Violet. I’m tired of them coming up in moments like this.

“He found her before our first date. The time I spent with you had nothing to do with Leilani. Stop using that.”

“Really?” Violet sounds surprised by my admission.

“Yes, I felt I could date you because they were left to settle their own stuff. You should let them. Ambrose is pissed and hurt as anyone in his situation would be. Even if Leilani did feel justified, those two and those two only need to figure it out. It’s their marriage. My only goal was to get them to talk. He didn’t need me to find her. The rest is on them.” I lean my elbows on the cool surface to look at her across the island. “Anything that happens with us is between us. I don’t like your insinuation that my brother is somehow abusive or that I would help hurt my sister-in-law. I’ve been up front with my intentions from the moment I arrived. What have I done to make you think I’m deceptive?”

“I was just considering all angles.”

I sit down at the table because I'm too distracted to eat. I'm thinking we're on the verge of falling and she's thinking I'm an accomplice.

“There aren't any angles to consider. I never lied to you.”

She worries her lip as she tries to pick her words. For her sake, I hope she's picking carefully.

“I don't think you're dangerous. I doubt Ambrose is dangerous. Like I said, she showed up and didn't want to talk about why she left. We're both navigating in the dark on this. I couldn't understand why he'd find her now that you're here when he hasn't before.”

“Maybe they both needed time. It's still their problem now.”

She shrugs but it's not dismissive. It's a shrug that suggests that she doesn't know what to say.

“I guess it's easier than trying to figure out my own shit.”

I sit back in the chair and drop my elbow on the table. “Like what?”

Violet moves close to me while maintaining eye contact. “You, for one.”

“What about me?” I give Violet space to talk because I really need to know where she's going with this.

She's standing practically between my legs with her eyes feasting on my naked body. My dick stirs but my brain is considering getting dressed soon.

“Timothy, have you ever been crazy in love?”

I've had relationships and brief encounters. “I thought I was once, but it wasn't true. It was surface at best. Why?”

“It sounds scary and all-consuming.”

“Because it'll drive you crazy?”

She shakes her head. “Because it sounds like the kind of love you'd do anything to keep. Like how addicts continue to chase the ultimate high that can never reach.”

“And you don’t want that?”

She pouts a little and plays with the hem of the shirt, not knowing or caring that she’s flashing me.

“I used to think I didn’t.”

I tilt my head, trying to follow. “Why past tense?”

“It’s why I run, Timothy.”

Sitting up higher, I lean my elbows on my knees and look up at her. “You run from an abstract notion of love?”

Violet reaches out and slides her fingers into my hair. “It doesn’t feel like an abstract notion with you.”

My heart speeds up like we’re racing down a dark street and in danger of crashing. My feelings for Violet crashed a party I didn’t know I was attending. No one has ever affected me as quickly as she has.

“It doesn’t?”

“No, you asked me why you scare me. That’s why. All the abstract things seem very real when I’m with you. It’ll crush me if it’s an illusion.”

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CHAPTER 23

VIOLET

TALKING ABOUT FEELINGS IS ALWAYS AWKWARD FOR ME, BUT admitting that I see myself falling into a devastating kind of love with him is terrifying. His blue eyes stay connected with mine and while I want to look away, I feel like it'll upset him, since he's all about transparency.

Timothy's warm hand wraps around my thigh and pulls me closer.

"What do you need from me?"

I can hear his question but it's unclear to me what he means.

"What do you mean?"

He pulls me onto his lap and toys with my hand. "What do you need from me to feel safe enough to fall, knowing I'd be right there with you? What will help you understand I'd follow you into insanity?" My heart flutters and a bolt of nervousness washes through me. Timothy laces his fingers with mine and kisses my knuckles. "If you want to be crazy in love, Vi, let's be crazy together."

"My parents-" I begin but am cut off.

"Their divorce has nothing to do with us. They moved on, you should too. Back to us, if you want to be crazy in love, I'll go with you."

Only Timothy can be dead serious while completely nude. I'd forgotten about his lack of clothes until he turned me in his

lap to straddle him. He tucks his finger under my chin to bring my attention back to his blue orbs.

“You’d do that?”

It’s crazy how shy and bashful Timothy makes me sometimes. I have talked a big game to plenty of guys in the past, but he gives me pause. His smile is soft, with a little challenge in it.

“I’ve been willing to do that from the moment you called me Timmy.”

His remark pulls a giggle out of me. He’d walked into my meeting with so much authority, I wanted to humble him a little. Three weeks and he has already wrecked my world like he threatened to do earlier.

I drop my head on his shoulder. “Can I tell you something?”

Timothy kisses my forehead. “Anything.”

“I was single at the wedding.”

His chest rumbles with his confused hum. “You talked about your boyfriend the entire time?”

I roll my eyes from the residual embarrassment. “I’d broken up with him a week prior. I used him as a shield.”

“From what?”

Sitting up again, I look at him although my eyes don’t move past his lips.

“You.”

“Me?” This information is amusing to him. I watch his lips as they try not to twitch. “I learned after I’d arrived in Santa Barbara that you were attracted to me then, but a shield? I’ll have to say you played it off. I thought you were completely in love.”

“I couldn’t stand that fool. I saw you and my brain just seized up or something. There was no guarantee that you’d like me. If you did, I was scared I’d end up naked and devastated.”

I sigh hard, despite his amusement. Timothy lifts his shirt from my body and takes it off me.

“You were right about one thing; you would have been naked.” Timothy cups my breasts, teasing my nipples with his thumbs. “But I would not have devastated you.”

He’s making my body tingle with desire, but I’m trying to follow the conversation. Squirming a little, I do my best to ignore what he’s doing to my body.

“You were hardly in town. I just thought you’d bewitch me and disappear again. It was easier to put you in the fantasy category.”

He slides his hands down my sides and hips to cup my ass. I’m still hot from being left hanging. My body still craves what he would have done if he wasn’t mad. I follow his lead until I’m impaling myself on his hard dick.

We moan from the feeling of our bodies joining yet again.

“Do I feel real to you now?” He pulls my hair, forcing my head back and runs his hot tongue from the hollow of my throat to my chin. “Can you feel me, Vi?”

I feel him all over, inside and out. Timothy’s presence is so big, I feel like it consumes me. I can’t help but orbit around his sun.

“Yes.”

His hands on my hips command my body although I’m on top. And I surrender. I want everything he’s offering me.

“I thought you were beautiful that night, but maybe it wasn’t our time.”

I can only sigh as I brace my hands on his shoulders to rock my hips on him. Timothy gives me a high that I never thought I’d feel and it’s nothing like I feared.

“No,” I sigh because I’m losing my connection to the conversation.

“Look at me, Vi.” I open my eyes to find his hooded gaze. “I’m all in. Are you?”

An excited tingle travels up my spine, followed by his strong fingers. I don't want anyone else to experience Timothy. They can't have his aroused sighs, be tickled by his beard, or feel him deep inside. It's no longer acceptable for him to want anyone else.

“Yes.”

A moan escapes his throat as if I'm speaking dirty to him. Timothy smacks my ass hard, then squeezes my cheek to calm the sting.

“Claim me.” His demand has a hint of vulnerability that makes it sound like a plea.

I have no reason to hesitate anymore since we're on the same page.

“You're mine, Timmy.”

In the spirit of claiming, I grab his hair and pull him into an aggressive kiss.

Timothy entertains me for a second before I feel the smile on his lips. I hold on tight when he suddenly stands and deposits me on the table.

“You're mine, too. Don't fucking forget it.”

The fire in his statement makes my pussy clench before he fucks me on the table and thoroughly ruins me for everyone else.

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TIMOTHY

Two Weeks Later

“THANK YOU, PLUCKING LADIES, AND *TIMMY*,” VIOLET SAYS with a dramatic eye roll that makes all the women giggle, “for coming to the pinning ceremony for the new members. As you know, each of you gets a custom pin for a membership gift that matches your plant name.”

“I’d think your *girlfriend* would be happy that we have a shared interest.”

It’s no secret to the ladies that Violet and I are a couple, but it still annoys her when I use a shameless plug. Oh-fucking-well. I’ll announce it to whomever needs to hear it. Violet is mine and I am hers.

My eyes rake over her moss green fitted jumpsuit in a way that makes some of the women let out lady whistles. Marigold, another person who recently jumped ship and followed Violet west, is nice enough to ignore all of the teasing to stand by, waiting for the ceremony to continue. She’s almost as southern as her name and had *blessed my heart* within minutes of meeting me.

“Yeah, and that’s why you’re just now getting a pin, sir. I was trying to wait you out, but you insist on being a *Plucking Lady*.”

No matter how long she pulls out *Lady*, it doesn’t change my desire to stay in the club and the other ladies don’t mind.

“Pin me, woman, before I spank you.”

Violet looks like she was going to defy me, but I know the punctual side of her cannot stand to delay her meeting any longer.

“I’m moving on. Not because you told me, but because I need to stay on schedule.” She picks up the pin made for Marigold and stands in front of her. “Marigold, may your plants be plentiful, your flowers bloom beautifully, and thank you for plucking with us.”

Violet and Marigold smile at each other while Violet attaches the pin to the lapel of Marigold’s blazer. Once done, the ladies clap while Violet and Marigold pose for pictures. Soon, Marigold joins the other ladies as Violet picks up the greenest pin she could have custom ordered, purposely emphasizing that my “Plant/flower name” is grass. She didn’t even try to incorporate my middle name, Chervil, which is kinda like parsley. I know she knows my middle name. Just grass. She’s my little asshole.

“As for the *interloper* with testicles-”

“Who throws amazing parties,” I add in my defense, not the least bit offended.

Before, I wasn’t leaving the club until I got information for Ambrose, but now I consider the ladies my friends and actually like going to the meetings. She’s stuck with me on all accounts.

She sighs like it kills her soul to make me an official Plucking Lady, despite her begging me to fuck her harder a mere hour ago.

“Timothy-”

“May my Violet remain in bloom and her nectar be plentiful.”

Her eyes grow huge as some red tints her skin, but I’m already pulling her into the kind of kiss that she says melts her panties. The ladies cheer, but the world is starting to disappear for me. We have the launch party for my Heywood Farms line hitting the grocery stores after this, but I’m more than willing to be very late and well fucked.

I break the kiss to laugh when Violet sticks me with my pin.

“Give me that.” I chuckle as I take it from her and pin myself. “You will pay for that, Vi.”

Her eyes sparkle with mischief; she wants what I’ll do to her. We’re definitely going to be late. We take our club pictures then open up the event to those not in our club. I’m hosting again and decided to have a party instead of labeling it as a meeting. The ladies join their guests while I pull Violet in the opposite direction. Since Ambrose and Leilani are still duking it out somewhere in Santa Barbara, Violet is still without a co-president. She told me she texted Ambrose and apologized. She, however, wasn’t surprised when he sent her “okay.” I knew that he would because he holds grudges. Violet feels bad and I believe her when she said she tried to get Leilani to reach out, but she knows it doesn’t change that she lied to him for months.

I left Marigold in charge since she’s another one of Violet’s trusted friends. Marigold’s family lived in Houston long enough for Violet and Marigold to complete a couple of years of high school together. Violet told me she was so amused to meet a “classically” southern girl with all her delicate sensibilities. She was crushed when Marigold’s family went back to South Carolina.

Luckily, they’ve kept in touch throughout the years, so Marigold felt comfortable moving to the coast to start over. From what? I don’t know. If Violet and I are clear on one thing now, it’s the value of minding our business.

“Where are we going? I mean, I know what part of the house this is, but the party is in the opposite direction.”

“I’m aware.”

“We don’t have time for a quickie. Your event is starting soon, and Cole should be here soon.”

I pull her into my bedroom and turn to her. “Cole said something came up, and he’ll be here in the morning. And I

have people in place for the launch party. Even if all of that wasn't true, it can still wait."

She nods slowly because we've been working on keeping her in the moment more and less about her checklists.

I stop in the closet and hold her hands. "What do you see, Violet?"

"Your closet that is the same size as my condo."

"Take a closer look." She spins slowly and her mouth drops open when it all clicks.

"My stuff is in here. Timothy."

She breathes my name like it's a warning, but I don't care. "Yes, I moved you in. We live together now. Surprise."

"Aren't we supposed to discuss it?" She challenges me with a half-smile.

"Yeah, you said let's be crazy in love and I said okay." I pull her to me and take a slow peck of her lips. "You can't do this without some crazy."

"Or love," she interjects.

"That's implied," I tease her between kisses.

Violet puts her fingers on my lips to stop me from kissing her. "I once knew a guy that felt *implied* wasn't good enough. In fact, he got a pin to my club for that reason. It's explicit or nothing."

"I love you, Violet." I squeeze her plush ass with both hands and pull her closer to my erection. "How *explicit* do you want it."

She shudders from the suggestion, but her eyes shine with unshed tears as she wraps herself around me, removing any available space between us.

"I'm glad you put your running shoes away," I say into her hair. I love having her in my arms; it doesn't have to be sexual.

"Unless I'm running to you." Violet hooks her arms behind my neck. "Pick me up."

Bending my knees a little, I grab her hips and she wraps her legs around my waist once she's high enough. Violet grabs my cheeks and presses her forehead to mine.

"I love you so much, I should be terrified with just how much in such a short time, but I have faith in how you'll handle my heart."

"Like a rare treasure," I promise her.

I can do everything I need to do from Santa Barbara. I can't imagine living on a different coast from her. Hell, I hated sleeping in separate beds some nights. When I was on the way to Santa Barbara, I thought I'd just look to settle down after I returned, but now I understand I was heading to my forever.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Francesca Penn lives in Texas with her husband and son. While obtaining her Technical Writing degree, a creative writing course and playwriting elective reawakened her desire to create stories. Her brain lives in fiction; even the songs she listens to on the radio have music videos in her head.

When she is not writing, she can be found hounding her loved ones with multiple “What-if” scenarios. As a true closet romantic, she is prone to filling up her DVR with Hallmark movies. A friend once told her she’d trained the whole 20

plus years she’d known her to write romance since her nose was always in a love story.

Francesca believes that love is colorblind and plans to provide a mix of couples of different races and ethnicities because – to her – men are like Skittles and we all know their motto. If you want more, she can be found at the links below.



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